

BOOK ONE – *Judith Glynn*.*Prologue:*

Pressing the computer start button with a flourish and leaning back in his leather padded chair Oliver Ross waited. On the first floor the budding author's study afforded a clear view of the residents' car park with his desk deliberately positioned by the window. Innocently the young man enjoyed watching his neighbours' movements; the delivery men and ambulance drivers conducting their business throughout the day. But Oliver was also a sexual voyeur and got a kick out of watching the woman who lived in *flat 1*, every time she ventured out on some errand.

The empty white page appeared on the screen; above it the toolbar, the letters and symbols enabling the various textual manipulations. Today was the day, thought Oliver, with his characteristic sense of the dramatic. He had cleared his diary so that he could make a start on a literary project he had been putting off for a long time. Provided there were no unforeseen obstacles he felt he could make good initial progress with the characters and plot outline already firmly fixed in his imagination. Oliver typed the first words, *Chapter 1 – The Grange*, and smiled in anticipation.

The novel was to be a tale of lust, murder and obsession and in his opinion had the two necessary ingredients of any best seller, namely sex and violence. On a technical level Oliver had decided to embellish the

opening scene with a lot of physically descriptive detail. It was important for the reader to establish a strong sense of place and the raw material was available. All he had to do was look and describe

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what he saw in his immediate environment; an easy enough undertaking.

Yet Oliver's concentration was disrupted when he saw the widow emerge from downstairs. She glided gracefully across his line of sight in the direction of her late husband's silver *Mark 2 Jaguar*, the classic saloon built for grace, pace and space. The car glinted in the afternoon sun but was a mere side show. Taking in every detail of this handsome woman's appearance from the style of her hair to the straight seams on her stockings Oliver moved uncomfortably in his chair. He knew from experience that the writing would have to wait. Mrs Glynn had been driving Oliver crazy for the best part of a year but it was all good research, the best possible research.

Chapter 1 - *The Grange*

There is an unmarked turning a mile or so down Manchester's *Bury New Road* in the neighbourhood of Broughton Park. It escapes the attention of most people leaving the city by car or bus, being shielded from view behind tall verdant elms and conifers. As far as the *hoi polloi* are concerned this exclusive enclave does not exist, but for the army of regular cleaners and gardeners tasked with its maintenance *The Grange* is an all too tangible reality. *The Grange* is quite separate and distinct from the dilapidated social housing of nearby Higher Broughton with its leaking roofs and abject lack of basic amenities.

Mainly rich elderly people occupy the flats in this red brick edifice. A melange of styles the first and second floors boast windows that slide open on to alpine decked balconies evocative of the Austrian *Tyrol*, while the ground floor grants access to garden boxes containing exotic plants indigenous to the Mediterranean. Like the vulnerable residents these

delicate flowers have to be nurtured indoors during the harsh winter months.

A cosseted sanctuary in a hostile environment *The Grange's* proximity to the inner city's restaurants and theatres is cited as a boon by its disingenuous creators. In reality Manchester is a no-go area at night for those with something to lose. The wealthy inhabitants of *The Grange* prefer to entertain at home away from the dangerously dispossessed and clinically insane, euphemistically known as *the care-in-the communities*.

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Someone lost seeking directions or the occasional door-to-door sales person may stumble on *The Grange* by happenstance. Uninvited visitors are usually met with a wall of cold silence and seldom return. This gated compound is the most undisturbed of residences; an oasis of calm in a jungle of noisy road works and suffocating exhaust fumes where only the poor walk the streets through necessity. There is an entrance in the corner of this *L-shaped* building, which abuts the rectangular shaped car park on two of its sides. The glass fronted double door leads into a plush vestibule that smells of furniture polish and new carpets but this is just the glossy front-of-house facade. A scruffy looking service door at the rear of the building also gives keyed-access to the apartments. It is tucked away

out of view like a dirty secret behind *The Grange's* respectable veneer, a blind spot unobserved by the building's state of the art security cameras.

On decent summer days all of the windows are thrown open as the air is oppressively fetid in this labyrinth of corridors and rooms. Residents sit on their balconies and read newspapers over breakfast croissants, or partake of a salad luncheon perhaps with a glass of chilled *Chardonnay*. Old ladies can be observed conscientiously watering *fuchsias* or re-potting beloved *bougainvillea* outside their obsessively neat apartments. At such times there is a privileged aroma in the air, of newly cut privets, the scent of flowers, and freshly ground coffee. *The Grange* is untainted by the stench of the nearby city, with its litter strewn pavements and puddles of splattered vomit where beggars unthinkingly contribute to Manchester's moribund sense of civic pride.

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- "Have you got any spare change?" they ask with humiliated desperation in their eyes.

They have nothing to sell unlike the skinny hookers who patrol the archways behind *Piccadilly Station*; local girls driven to despair. At the same time the gypsy band plays on *Cross Street*; their haunting melodies echoing through the concrete arcades and windswept thoroughfares. Iterative Mexican trumpets mimic the

doleful theme from *Rio Bravo* as appreciative punters smile in recognition and young tarts climb into strangers' cars.

On rainy days, *The Grange's* residents remain huddled indoors behind heavy drapes with the central heating turned up. Large reflective puddles form outside on the unyielding tarmac. The dark fast moving clouds challenge the tall overarching trees that sway violently in the threatening winds while the weather moves to the east and to the rising ground, to the *West Yorkshire Heights* and beyond. The residents count in seconds the time between the flashing light and the drum roll of thunder, gauging the distance of the storm. They wait for its cessation so that once more they can venture outside but *The Grange* is not a place for social interaction. Cars drive up with little time to waste and passengers quickly disappear into the building; residents with shopping bags or the district nurse doing her weekly rounds.

The handsome widow looked out of her large ground floor window on this bright summer day as Peggy, her Irish cleaning lady, busied herself with dusting and rearranging fashion magazines.

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- "I've just about finished, *Mrs G*," said Peggy.

Mrs Glynn hated being called *Mrs G*. She had repeatedly asked Peggy to address her as Mrs Glynn. Mrs Glynn couldn't decide if Peggy was forgetful or being deliberately insubordinate.

- "Have you made the bed?" asked Mrs Glynn.
- "I have, *Mrs G*, though I noticed that you are getting low on linen," replied Peggy.

She doesn't miss a thing, noted Mrs Glynn.

- "I spilled my cocoa in bed the other night and had to use a set of sheets," explained Mrs Glynn.

Wonders never cease, thought Peggy. *Lady Muck* has actually made her own bed.

- "That would explain it," said Peggy. "Is your tumble drier working now then?"
- "Yes. I had a man come in to repair it," replied Mrs Glynn. "If you could iron the sheets the next time you visit that would be appreciated?"

I'm a laundry woman as well as a skivvy now, thought Peggy.

- "I can do that though I may end up over running my time," replied Peggy.
- "If you work an extra fifteen minutes I will pay you for the additional quarter of an hour," said Mrs Glynn.

Aye, you will n'all, thought Peggy, timed to the nearest *feckin'* minute.

- "So, I'll be on my way now and see you Thursday," announced Peggy making to leave.
- "Can you make sure that you are punctual tomorrow for my son?" asked Mrs Glynn.
- "I'm always *feckin'* punctual for your beloved boy," muttered Peggy under her breath.
- "Yes I will, Mrs G," replied Peggy eager to get out of the flat.

Mrs Glynn watched from her window. She saw Peggy get into her shiny red *VW Polo* and drive away from *The Grange*. Mrs Glynn thought that she must be paying Peggy too much for her to be able to afford such a car. The widow's sly malevolence nearly worked its dark magic a few minutes later. Peggy barely avoided being involved in a road accident driving through a congested *Prestwich Village* on the *A56*.

- "Jesus!" she had exclaimed slamming on the brakes and winding down the driver's side window.
- "Will you watch where you're going you *wee eejit!*"

The old drunk had raised his arm in acknowledgement as he crossed the road in the direction of *The Donkey*. Peggy recognized the notorious toper as he unsteadily

negotiated his way around the wooden benches outside the pub.

- “Flynn,” she muttered under her breath. “Flynn, the drunken fool.”

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The Grange is not the only desirable residence in the area that stretches from Broughton Park to Prestwich and its huge psychiatric hospital, built in 1851 and at one time the largest asylum in the world. Large four and five bedroom houses, with generous gardens and gravel drives, have long been the family homes of prosperous traders and merchants and mirror the affluence of *Didsbury Village* to the south of the city.

The Grange is in many respects a symbol of the area’s future with its modern surveillance cameras and gated compound. The local community is selling up and downsizing to similar urban developments, or decamping to the leafy safety of towns such as Knutsford; recently voted the most desirable residential area in the North West of England and a veritable jewel in Cheshire’s *Golden Triangle* of plain, peaks and hills.

In the evenings *The Grange* presented a homely scene with windows brightly illuminated in the gloom. Residents were listed on a brightly displayed console in order from *flat 1* to *20*; the names *Glynn*, *Price*, and *Goldstone* grouped together sounding like firms of solicitors. The car park was well lit by arc lights

positioned high up on the side walls that extend as far as the concreted area's perimeter. At midnight Mrs Glynn, of *flat 1*, sat in her window; the surrounding trees exuding menace in the imagination of the widow. Mrs Glynn stared at the amorphous trees, trying to discern in their featureless appearance some movement or incongruent form, until she was satisfied that she had fulfilled the obligations of her nightly neighbourhood watch. Mrs Glynn was the self styled guardian of *The Grange* and protector of all that she held dear.

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Around lunchtime in summer, when the bright sun seared the tarmac outside her window, Judith's pale serious face looked on. Her regular features, save for very full sensuous lips and a slightly upturned nose, were complemented by dark brown eyes of the most penetrating hue. Jet black hair, parted in the middle, was tied up in a modest *chignon* and she wore no make-up. You could not clearly see her body which was hidden by a long loose pleated black skirt and baggy black cardigan but she seemed to be a substantially built woman. There was also strength in her striking face with its well defined bone structure and features. She sat in her chair calm and motionless, looking out at the world from the darkness of her physical and spiritual prison. She had lived in an apathetic slumber,

numbed by submission and a sense of helplessness, for the best part of a decade.

Only in the evening when the lights were first switched on could one could see inside Judith's apartment.

Neville and Judith Glynn, the son and daughter-in-law of the elder Mrs Glynn, occupied the ground floor *flat 2* across the hallway from their relative. The married couple's home was a two bedroom affair, one *en suite*, plus a large sitting room and adjacent kitchen. It was furnished with old fashioned armchairs and dark wooden bookshelves containing several religious texts. The ambience reeked of religious formality and respectability. A recent photographic portrait of an unsmiling Mrs Glynn Senior hung over the mantelpiece in the lounge. There was a modest television and an antique radio set which complemented the room's austere aspect. Neville also owned an old fashioned record player and a collection of *LPs* which lay stacked and

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neglected in the corner of the room; Russian classical composers rather than the vulgar populist offerings of *Morrissey* or *Mark E. Smith*.

There was a constant need for electric lighting in the young couple's sombre abode which was starved of natural sunlight. Unlit it was impossible to see inside this cave like dwelling. The window framed an

impenetrable darkness which shrouded any movement or indication of presence. Judith's armchair was positioned in the shadows out of sight during the day. She didn't wish to be regarded as a prying busybody, or in any way a party to her mother-in-law's unremitting surveillance. Least of all she did not want to attract the attentions of Mrs Glynn herself. The old lady might divine in Judith's morose inactivity some seeds of dissatisfaction or malcontent.

Each evening Mrs Glynn would visit her children and join them for dinner and conversation, arriving around *6pm* and leaving no later than *11pm*. After all a young married couple needed some time on their own and consideration for others was the widow's watchword!

- "You young people must be so impatient for me to leave. I remember my husband, Daniel, always wanted me to himself in the evenings", would remark Mrs Glynn with a coquettish smile.
- "But we love your company, Mummy," Neville would usually reply. "Don't we, darling?"
- "Yes, the evenings wouldn't be the same without you," would confirm Judith dutifully agreeing with her husband.

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- "Well you must tell me if you two need more time alone. I was young myself once you know."

- “Mummy, you must put such thoughts out of your mind. Judith and I have lots of time together and we both look forward to your nightly visits. Everything is just perfect as it is. Right, darling?”
- “Of course,” replied Judith.

Mrs Glynn was pleased by such public displays of the young couple's affection but she knew that her continued attendance each evening was assured for financial reasons. The old lady paid all the bills as Neville only did some occasional free lance book-keeping, given to him by local businessmen who were eager to please his mother. Just as dependent as her husband and without an income of her own Judith was similarly obligated and therefore designated the home maker. She was responsible for the cooking and maintaining the apartment, though in reality she was helped by a part-time cleaner who came in three times a week. Peggy also did for Mrs Glynn on alternate mornings. Judith liked her Irish char lady and laughed at her coarse turn of phrase and subversive sense of fun which was so at odds with the stifling propriety of the matriarch.

Before dinner each evening Mrs Glynn would play dominoes with Neville and sometimes Judith. The young woman never really took to the game and made child like errors which annoyed Neville, a punctilious man who admired precision. The meal was served by Judith

around 7-30pm and was simple fare as neither her husband

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nor Mrs Glynn were hearty eaters. Judith prepared the older woman's *TCP*, *tomatoes-cucumber-peppers*, with a touch of *TLC*, tender loving care, as they liked to joke. The offer of a cut of meat was sometimes accepted and that was usually regarded by Mrs Glynn as an ample sufficiency, washed down with a glass of hot water. Mrs Glynn insisted that hot water aided the digestive process, a theory that Judith had never ventured to challenge. Friday night was the special religiously observed dinner of the week and invariably consisted of a main fish course; freshly delivered to *The Grange* that day.

- "He's always been such a fussy eater ever since he was a little boy," would tease Mrs Glynn, with the predictability of one of Neville's well worn *LPs*.
- "You know that I have only ever really liked your cooking, Mummy. No offence, Judith," would reply Neville each time.

The conversation was always the same. Judith couldn't understand why they both continually repeated themselves with such a lack of self awareness. The dialogue between mother and son was almost ritualistic.

- "I used to cut up toast into little soldiers and dip them in your runny boiled eggs my boy."
- "Yes, I remember that. How wonderful."
- "And bake you sponge cakes on your birthdays."
- "Yes, I recall that I always had problems blowing out the candles but it was the thought that counted."

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- "I know my poor darling. Childhood was a trial for you but look at you now. You have grown into such a handsome man, hasn't he Judith?"
- "Yes, I am a lucky woman."
- "He could have had anyone," said Mrs Glynn.
- "Mother please, you exaggerate," said Neville.
- "Oh such false modesty and so typical of you," exclaimed Mrs Glynn. "You were an ugly little duckling and now you have grown into a majestic swan."

A slightly embarrassed Neville would smile at reference to his childhood, and mother and son would unctuously exchange looks of mutual adoration. Mrs Glynn would thus dine with the young couple every night of the week with *TCP* and *TLC* on the menu; the routine being punctuated by a formal dinner on the *Sabbath* and *Bridge Night* on Thursdays.

Thursday was the evening when The Glynn family entertained guests with a spot of supper followed by

several rubbers of cards. It was the night when the gathered company, which included a former *Mayor of Salford* and a retired *Detective Inspector* accompanied by their respective spouses, let their hair down a bit with a glass of sherry. Mrs Glynn's fortified nightly cocoa was her little secret so she always loudly heralded Thursday night's imbibitions as a unique event in the weekly social calendar. Excruciatingly for Judith Thursday nights always followed a familiar turgid pattern. To Mrs Glynn, Neville and their pompous guests this permanent fixture represented the

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apotheosis of good taste; a civilised blend of fun, games and conversation for mature respectable adults. Yet Judith hated Thursday evenings and had to draw on all her reserves of inner strength to endure the weekly ordeal which represented the nadir of an already intolerable existence. She would serve the refreshments and fulfil her hostess obligations with as little ceremony as possible before retiring gratefully to her favourite armchair and the distraction of soporific needlework.

Meanwhile on Manchester's dimly lit *Market Street* the seated beggars requested alms and the wily Rumanian vendors sang their seductive refrains. *The Grange* was out of sight and sound proofed from this *Third World* aspect of the city. In a little hidden corner overlooked

by economic austerity *The Grange* continued to thrive on its diet of entrenched wealth and privilege. The *FT Index* and proposed Council Tax hike were paramount topics, and the juicy scandal of the local *Member of Parliament's* extra-marital affair with his researcher was the talk of the neighbourhood. How could *Ivan Thewliss MP* have been so indiscrete and risked everything for a casual fling with his *ingénue* assistant? What a bloody fool! The general consensus was that if you were going to conduct an extra marital affair then at least have the good manners to not get caught.

The inhabitants of *The Grange* were the direct descendents of the capitalists who had tapped into the wealth originally created by the *Industrial Revolution*. Now two centuries later they had sold off all the warehouses to an equally rapacious cabal of Chinese property

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developers. Too busy counting their loot, untroubled by outmoded notions of patriotism, Manchester's plutocrats prospered in this brave new global world. The residents of *The Grange* were devoid of conscience and all slept soundly in their beds. They put their good fortune down to their own brilliance and strength of character. It was the natural order of affairs that the innately talented should prevail over the feckless and feeble minded.

To the outside world Manchester was thriving with property prices on the rise and the city centre boasting impressive new skyscrapers. *Bury New Road* followed an old Roman route straight as a dye through the suburbs of *Sedgley Park* and *Prestwich Village*, symbolically matching the purported virtue and propriety of its residents. For the cultivated with money to spend there were art galleries, a world class *Halle* orchestra, and museums aplenty dotted around the crumbling Gothic Town Hall. For the less high brow there were bars, *The Gay Village*, and dimly lit parks and alleyways littered with used condoms and discarded underwear. Manchester with its political history, love of football and music had always been a fun city tempered with an undercurrent of violence and criminal disregard. The condition of the working class had improved a lot since *Engel's 1844* observations, but poverty was still widespread and old habits die hard.

Oliver thought that was as good a place as any to conclude the opening chapter. He was pleased that he had managed to depict *The*

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Grange in detail, as well as describing the rich idle parasites that lived there. Luckily, the widow had stayed out for the afternoon so he had made good progress. In fact now that his day's work was complete

he was quite looking forward to her return. After all she was one of the central characters in his story and he now had a legitimate excuse for spying on her movements. Oliver was so determined to get all her details just right. He hadn't even bothered to change the widow's name, not knowing how he could possibly improve on reality. But Mrs Glynn was just part of the tale and he had other issues to work through aside from lust and obsession. The novel would be his statement about everything; politics, religion, class, money and Manchester. In *Chapter One* some of these themes had been introduced and the author was happy to be starting the cathartic process.

Already Oliver had conveyed a sense of the city's feral menace and how *The Grange* was an oasis of calm in a hostile environment. He liked the way that he had made *The Grange* seem like a hypocritical person with its chic facade belying a truly shabby nature. Despite his privileged life Oliver had always felt an affinity for the poor. He knew that were it not for his inherited money he would be in the same parlous position. If truth be known, Oliver was equally unemployable and obsolete in the increasingly competitive world of work. But his deep seated empathy lay with the fictional Judith. He identified with his literary heroin; a sexually repressed voyeur desperate to break free of a tedious life sapping celibacy.

As a writer Oliver recognised the vanity of his project, but he hoped that others would read his work and see in it some semblance of the truth. The silver *Mark 2 Jaguar* was confidently reversing into its usual parking space down below. The manoeuvre completed he could see Mrs Glynn through the windscreen tending to her appearance in a small mirror which she had retrieved from her handbag. Apparently satisfied with the fresh application of lipstick the widow opened the driver's door and swung out her elegantly clad legs. As Mrs Glynn stood upright and straightened out the creases on her skirt she glanced up at the curtained window causing Oliver to instinctively lean back in his chair. The widow locked the *Jaguar* with a wave of her key fob. Affecting a wiggle of the hips she walked towards *The Grange*, all the time wondering if the young man really was watching her from his first floor apartment.

Chapter 2 – *Mrs Glynn*

The living arrangements of the Glynn family had been the brainchild of the matriarch. Fifty five years old and shrewd in financial matters, Mrs Glynn still possessed a formidable domineering personality which showed no signs of waning with age. Married to local pharmacist and property developer, Daniel Glynn, for thirty two years, she had been left a sizeable sum following her husband's death. Now she was content to live out her days a widow near to her beloved son Neville, and had ruled out the possibility of ever re-marrying. There had been no shortage of offers from admirers, and not all from elderly men. Mrs Glynn had been flattered by these attentions but frankly shocked when a neighbour's twenty eight year old son had revealed his amorous feelings in the form of a love letter:

Dear Mrs Glynn,

I thought long and hard before writing you this letter but I can't contain myself any longer. Ever since I can remember I have loved you and now my desire has become intolerable. While sorry to hear of your husband's death at last we can now be together. You are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen. I dreamed of you as a teenager and have done so ever since. When I was sixteen I would spy on you from my bedroom window as you tended your garden.

Remember those tight red trousers that you used to wear! That image, with you in blissful ignorance of my longing, has been a source of inspiration for the last dozen or more years. Now as a mature man

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my passion and craving know no bounds. I cannot remain silent any longer now that nothing stands in our way. We must be together or I will be forever doomed to live a life of spiritual and physical frustration.

Yours eternally, Oliver.

P.S. Name a time and place and I will be there.

The widow was mortified to learn of such lustful thoughts from Oliver of all people, who she had always considered to be one of Neville's boyhood contemporaries and besides he was such an ugly boy.

Oliver's perverse infatuation for his school friend's mother had been understandable. A still beautiful woman with expensively fashioned platinum hair, the fragrant Mrs Glynn cut a fine figure with tailored clothing emphasising her feminine curves. Daniel had first introduced her to the fashion houses of Paris, and *Dior* still had a life size mould of her torso which perfectly replicated the dimensions of her bust, waist and hips which hadn't changed in thirty years. Even though those days of foreign travel were now over she

still maintained a keen interest in fashion. Every year a bespoke *haute couture* outfit was sent over from the French capital with money being no object. She still remembered the heavily accented tones of her dress fitter and confidant from those glamorous bygone days when she would spend long weekends with Daniel in *The City of Love*.

The tailor was a fat woman from *Lille* who belied her ordinary appearance by being such an expert in her field. The fashion houses

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of all the major capitals would have offered the dumpy little ex-seamstress a job with a blank cheque to name her price. Nevertheless this consummate stylist remained loyal to *Dior* and Mrs Glynn always sent *Giselle* a Christmas card as a small token of her continuing appreciation. She could still hear her heavily accented tones as if it were yesterday.

- "Madame looks very beautiful in this outfit. *Tres belle, Madame, tres belle.*"
- "You don't think that it makes me look too big?"
- "*Mais non*, Madame is a real woman, *une femme de terre.*"

Mrs Glynn had taken these words as a compliment while admiring herself in the flatteringly lit mirrors of the fitting room. The outfits always drew the eye to her

curves but not in an obvious way that overly accentuated her natural physical assets. At such moments she felt powerful and knew that she could get anything that she wanted from her husband. He was powerless to refuse even the most extravagant of her whims and totally malleable when faced with such irrefutable feminine beauty. On the streets of the French capital she made even more of an impression. Cutting a glamorous figure she would shop for hours on the *Rue de Rivoli*, and strut proudly around *The Louvre* enjoying the attention of young Frenchmen who did little to hide their lustful fascination.

Mrs Glynn had always been a stylish lady who kept in good shape with her life-long frugal diet of *TCP*, ever mindful of avoiding fatty foods and the necessity of counting the calories. At times it was a

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struggle to keep her figure but Madame always maintained her hour glass shape.

Daniel was proud to have such a stylish beautiful lady as his wife. He knew that men wanted Rachel but took it as a compliment and didn't feel threatened by their attentions. At the end of each day he was the one who shared a bed with Rachel – she was his wife and nobody else's. He never considered the possibility that his wife may have had affairs, that sometimes on those trips to Paris she wished she was alone. It wasn't that Mrs

Glynn didn't appreciate the gifts that Daniel bestowed on her but at times she found him a bit of a bore. Her husband was always preoccupied with business and found it hard to relax. What was the point of being rich if you couldn't enjoy your good fortune? Daniel never really understood his wife in this important respect. She wanted to enjoy all the fine things in life and wasn't in the least bit interested how her husband earned the money to pay for them.

Several suitors had tested Mrs Glynn's resolve, post-Daniel, with invitations to dinner that had all been far too public and painfully above board. They had all made the mistake of thinking she was looking to re-marry and had been given curt treatment by the widow, who would remain single until her dying day. The message had gone out unequivocally via the local grapevine and the pestering had stopped. The neighbour's son, Oliver, had moved down to London on some flimsy pretext once his randy proposal had become common knowledge and police involvement was thankfully avoided.

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Some change to domestic arrangements had been warranted following Daniel's demise. Mrs Glynn came up with the idea of selling the five bedroom bay-windowed family house in Broughton Park. She purchased herself and her recently married son

adjacent apartments in the newly constructed and more practical development called *The Grange*. With a generous amount of capital left over, after the deduction of surveyor's, estate agent's and lawyer's fees, and notwithstanding Daniel's property portfolio, the family were sitting pretty financially. One day Neville would indeed be a wealthy man.

It was an undeniable fact that Mrs Glynn loved her sickly spoilt son, Neville, the more so for his life-long illness. She felt, in some misguided way, responsible for his physical infirmities and this compounded her devotion. However, her obsession with her son had turned Neville into an egotistical, immature *man-child* who pretended to be a God fearing but in reality sought only the gratification of his own selfish pleasures. An under-educated mediocrity, who only felt mentally content when performing some repetitive intellectual task, his ignorance constituted a further fatal weakness in his personality. Judith felt nothing for her demanding husband; a needy patient rather than a man who could inspire love. Neville was a sexless presence who lay beside her in their cold bed each night; a shell of a man who increasingly fuelled her sense of disgust and contempt for their parody of a marriage. She hated having him to wheel him the mile distance to Cheetham Hill every Saturday morning like the dutiful wife. Hypocritical Neville was too religious, or so he claimed, to take a taxi cab and save her the effort.

During the day with his thick spectacles and hunched posture - a myopic mole in human form - Neville favoured an area in the deepest recess of *flat 2*, from which he seldom ventured other than to bathe, sleep or attend his weekly physiotherapy session at *North Manchester General Hospital*. He usually sat under the arc of his favourite *anglepoise* lamp while he studied his chess board, completely lost in concentration and oblivious to Judith's round the clock presence in their shared captivity. Sometimes for a change, he would work on basic book keeping calculations at his desk, and gnaw on his pencil, imagining himself to be a genius engaged in the most complex of mathematical calculations. Crippled and asthmatic Neville had been wheelchair bound since childhood, the result of an infectious viral disease of the *polio* genus. He had some movement in his legs but may as well have been dead from the waist down; his erotic interest in Judith only extending to the occasional chaste kiss on the cheek when she had particularly pleased him by following the advice of his mother on some domestic matter.

With a commanding view of the car park during the day, Mrs Glynn Senior noted down car registrations and times of arrival and departure of visitors and residents, drawing up identikit descriptions in the procedural style of a meticulous police constable. Meanwhile Judith stared mindlessly out at the cars, from the anonymity

of the shadows and saw only vague shapes coming and going either side of a punctuating mid-day. In the background her husband mentally masturbated over his abstract hobbies, totally disinterested in the outside world and other human beings, while the two women kept

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vigil in their radically different styles.

The motivations and preoccupations of the Judith and Mrs Glynn could not have been more divergent; opposite polar extremes of the perceptive range that runs from unfiltered animalistic sensation to cold clinical analysis. And then there was Neville, willingly trapped in his own solipsistic bubble, like a foetus delighting in the warmth, nourishment and safety provided by its mother's womb.

The only light to be seen after midnight emanated from *flat 1*. Mrs Glynn went to bed every night at *2am*, after imbibing her favourite hot cocoa laced with a wee nip of brandy. Twenty feet away Neville snored with rhythmic breaths while Judith lay awake in contemptuous indifference in the marital bed. She was now a magnificent thirty year old woman in robust physical good health, bored and frustrated and yet not fully recognizing the cause or possible solution to her *ennui*. *The Grange* was quiet and lifeless to the point of morbidity and matched Judith's torpor. There were no

late night bouts of loud music or screaming infants, and certainly no creaking bedsprings to indicate passion or vitality in this energy sapping sarcophagus. Mrs Glynn and her son were both exceedingly happy with this anodyne status quo. They exuded smug self satisfaction and contentment with the creature comforts and sheer convenience that *The Grange* provided.

All the while, Judith dreamed her life away, ignored by an insensitive husband and oblivious mother-in-law. A swaying tree top or the sound of bird song sometimes summoned up happier images from

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her childhood. She remembered playing in *Philips Park* as a carefree young girl while her father watched on. This area of woodland and a protected nature reserve had once been the private grounds of the wealthy Philips family who had made their fortune from textiles. As a twelve year old she would lay flat on her stomach in the park's long grass and pretend that she was an animal creeping up on the pigeons, her dark eyes blazing, ready to spring on her prey. Father would be sat nearby on a bench engrossed in conversation with Mrs Glynn. It was always Mrs Glynn in her memory, and it must have been during one of these discussions that the adults had first negotiated her future. Once Judith was twenty one years of age she would marry Neville. Judith could not remember an alternative possibility

ever being considered. Mrs Glynn had therefore always been a part of her life exerting her influence either directly or by proxy, without Judith's consultation. Judith could not remember her own mother who had been taken away when she was still a small infant.

- "Your mother is in the best place, where she can get the care and attention that she needs," had explained Judith's father.
- "Daddy, has Mummy gone to heaven?"
- "She has gone to a better place, yes."
- "Will I see Mummy again?"
- "One day my little poppet, if you continue to be a good little girl."

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Judith's mother, Barbara, was never mentioned again. She was destined to live out the rest of her life in *Prestwich Hospital*, out of sight and forgotten. It was understood that Judith should concern herself with her own future, and eventual marriage to Neville Glynn.

Mrs Glynn was delighted with the marriage arrangement when it finally came to full fruition. It meant that Neville would have someone to care for him after her she died. The comfort and safety of her beloved son's future was assured; a deal first mooted

all those years earlier in the park when Judith and Neville were still children. Judith's intuition on that matter had been correct all along even though she had not been privy to the formal negotiations which her father had finally concluded when Judith had reached fledgling womanhood. The deal had been sealed very matter-of-factly between her father and Mrs Glynn.

- "Mrs Glynn, you know that our families have been firm friends for many years. Your husband and I went to the same local school and I have always been an admirer of his business prowess. If only I had been so blessed and born with more entrepreneurial flair like Daniel", had begun Judith's father.

Mrs Glynn had merely smiled and nodded her appreciation at these flattering comments, encouraging Judith's father to continue.

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- "You know that Judith's mother, Barbara, is never going to coming back, and that I myself am suffering from serious ill health."

Judith's father had raised his hand to assuage Mrs Glynn's look of concern at this point and continued.

- “I have put some money aside for Judith, which she will receive when she turns twenty one years of age. I know that it has long been your wish that Neville and Judith should be married one day and the money would constitute her wedding dowry. I have already spoken with Daniel regarding this proposal and he raised no objection. He said that the final decision would ultimately be one for you to make.”

Mrs Glynn had paused for a few seconds before replying, for the sake of appearances.

- “I have no objection. Indeed, I think it was always meant to be that the children would be united in marriage one day. But what of your plans?” enquired a concerned looking Mrs Glynn.
- “It is my wish to make one last journey to *The Holy Land*. There I will stay until my death. The doctor has given me three months. That is if you agree to take Judith under your wing and raise her like a second child and prospective daughter-in-law. Apart from her dowry additional funds have

been set aside for her living expenses, which I will entrust to your stewardship.”

Mrs Glynn had been thrilled by this additional financial consideration, and had struggled to maintain her inscrutable demeanour. She didn't understand why he was pretending to be so holy all of a sudden but kept her counsel and tried her best to look interested. Luckily Judith's father had been in self absorbed oratory mode and didn't pick up on Mrs Glynn's indifference regarding the proposed pilgrimage.

- "As you know Jerusalem is our capital. I will visit the *Temple Mount* one final time. We are the chosen people who made the original covenant with God and other religions that cite Jerusalem as their special place make bogus claims. Let the Moslems have Mecca and the Catholics their Rome. Jerusalem is ours and always will be no matter what the Palestinians say."

Mrs Glynn had remembered with irritation the formality of her own wedding; the rigmarole of the dancing, and Daniel being forced to break a ceremonial glass. She had gone through proceedings to please her *Orthodox* parents but had never really believed in the necessity for all the rules and prohibitions that strict adherence to religion demanded. There was probably a God but even if there was the chances were that he wouldn't be such a spoilsport. Early on Mrs Glynn decided that life was for living in the here and now. Bored with talk of religion she had brought the conversation back to more practical matters.

- "You know that I love Judith like my own child. I will bring her up with all the care and attention that she needs. Rest assured that she will be safe in my house. And when she is of age then the children will marry."
- "Thank you Mrs Glynn. Now I can go to my death with peace of mind. Her mother, Barbara, was a great beauty you know?"

Mrs Glynn nodded in agreement. Judith's mother had undoubtedly been a very beautiful woman in her prime, before the onset of madness and her forced detention.

- "When do you leave for *The Holy Land*?" had asked Mrs Glynn, once again all business.
- "Tomorrow morning at 6am direct to *Tel-Aviv* from *Manchester Airport*. I will not see you again after today. Thank you once again for agreeing to my proposal."

All Mrs Glynn's plans had come to fruition; Neville's future prosperity and security were now assured. On a personal level she was still a married woman with a rich husband and seemingly had it all, yet troublingly she had always appreciated the company of handsome men. Twice when Daniel had been absent on business she had exploited the opportunity with married gentlemen who were looking for the same commitment-free arrangement. Hotel rooms had been used in the

afternoon for this purpose; once with a senior police officer and another time with a distinguished barrister. These professional men mixed in the same social circles as her husband. The trysts had been easy to set up with the *Inspector* and the *QC*

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both quick to take up the chance of bedding such an attractive woman. She had loved Daniel but felt no remorse for her infidelity. He did his best to satisfy her needs but sometimes his efforts were not enough. She couldn't help having such a high sex drive which gave her so much joy and fulfilment but also drove her to distraction. Mrs Glynn had taken Daniel by surprise on their wedding night when she had instructed him in the arts of *cunnilingus* and *fellatio*, barking out commands if he slackened in his paces. As long as she was married and Daniel fulfilled his conjugal duties to the best of his ability Mrs Glynn could maintain the veneer of married respectability. But she would always need a man's hard firm body, or at the very least an authentic facsimile. Deprived of sex Mrs Glynn could become reckless in the pursuit of what she needed as a woman. She knew that this was her life force but also her weakness. Very few people knew about this dark obsessive side to her nature. It was ironic that Judith's mother had been committed for a similar compulsion. Mrs Glynn had been the sternest critics of Barbara's behaviour before

she had been ignominiously taken away by the authorities.

Ironically Daniel died of a sudden heart attack in the act of making love one afternoon. While Mrs Glynn hurriedly got dressed and phoned the authorities she questioned whether she had driven him too hard. Yet this soul searching was brief and Mrs Glynn only felt bitterness, perceiving herself as the victim left behind to pick up the pieces and provide for the family without the support of a husband. After his death it was inconceivable that she could remarry; a new husband with entitlements to her assets might complicate her son's

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future settlement. She would have to stay single and seize moments of pleasure when the opportunities presented themselves. There was always her public reputation to consider which would call for the utmost discretion. Her son's wellbeing came first and she thought that maybe she would have to make do with her collection of sex toys and accept the fact that she was getting older. But this would be easier said than done as Mrs Glynn's *libido* perversely grew stronger with the passage of time.

Mrs Glynn didn't leave *The Grange* very often except under special circumstances. Occasionally she would take a shopping trip for necessities or go to see the

family doctor for her routine check-ups. Her personal hairdresser from *King Street* would visit *The Grange* every two weeks, while all foodstuffs and wines, brandy *etc* would be delivered to the flat. Bills and financial outgoings were paid by direct debit through the bank while any information relating to her financial assets was communicated by post or via the phone. The widow lived a self contained life and was very much a creature of habit. She liked the comfort of routine which was at odds with the impulsive side to her personality.

The highlight of the week was Thursday's *Bridge Night* with the Horowitzs and Burgers, but she equally enjoyed the less formal company of her son and his wife. During the afternoons she would sit immaculately attired in her favourite chair with a commanding view of the car park. There was always the chance that a strapping young delivery man would turn up on some errand and arouse her latent

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passion, thus adding spice to her day and lurid detail to her nocturnal imaginings.

Chapter 3 – *Judith and Neville*

With the discussions between Mrs Glynn and Judith's father completed that fated day in the park the marital arrangement was settled. Judith's father had kissed his daughter goodbye and true to his prophecy had died three months later in a hospital in Jerusalem. It had always been his wish to be buried in *The Promised Land*; a cynical way of hedging his bets in the event of there being an afterlife. Judith's father had visited

Jerusalem several times, the first occasion in 1967 when Israel had just captured the holy city from Jordan. Over the years he had established reliable contacts in the *Jewish Quarter* of the old city and by paying an annual subscription fee to a synagogue near the *Jerusalem Forest* he had guaranteed a burial spot by *Mount Herzl*, the national cemetery of Israel. With his wife locked up and a daughter married off in Manchester he had no first degree relatives to mourn his passing by the graveside. Dispensing with a casket the body was simply wrapped in a shroud and placed directly into the ground. Back in England Judith wore black but then again she always did. As was the custom the funeral was conducted swiftly without wailing and the gnashing of teeth and Judith's father was soon forgotten. Ostensibly he was buried a righteous man, a man who had learned to live virtuously without love in his life. In the subsequent years Judith grew up with Neville, as his companion and unpaid nurse, wheeling the sickly youth round in his wheelchair and tending to his basic physical needs.

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Oliver turned off his computer, pleased to have overrun into the next chapter but wondered if the everyman reader he was targeting would still be engaged. He knew from personal experience that sex and the

promise of more was a compelling reason to stick with a book and keep flipping the pages, no matter how contrived the story or torturous the prose. *Judith Glynn* was going to be a dirty little book reflecting his prurient personal obsessions. He was convinced that there would be a demographic out there with the same pornographic schoolboy fantasies featuring the voluptuous older woman. Already Mrs Glynn's character had been temptingly delineated as the author's sexy ideal. Oliver had acknowledged as much with his cameo appearance in the story as the voyeuristic letter writer forced to move down to London.

The fictional Mrs Glynn was a seducer of men with a voracious sexual appetite whose exploits with senior policemen and barristers suggested a wildly impulsive nature. If only, thought Oliver. If only Mrs Glynn was really like that. Yet Oliver knew that Mrs Glynn's imaginary sexual adventures were an exercise in wish fulfilment and he saw in the depiction of the hapless Neville much of his own character; a selfish little nerd asthmatically jerking off at his desk. He also identified with Judith's wild spirit that had failed to be extinguished by an unloving father. This book would celebrate the commendable resilience of the human spirit.

Of course there was a downside to the writer's life. Oliver was plagued by insomnia and started to grind his teeth. There were the

Nightly cold sweats accompanied by the most vivid and disturbing nightmares. It was lucky that he slept alone as he would have caused serious damage to a wife or girlfriend lying in the same bed with his violent tossing and turning. One night terror had him being devoured alive from the feet up by a diabolical lioness - he had only escaped when his forceful kicking out at the imaginary big cat had cracked the bed frame. The dream seemed so chillingly symbolic and had to be meaningful. Was the murderous lioness a portent of his forthcoming annihilation or did the creature represent the qualities of tenacity and hope? Alternatively, was the lioness a straightforward representation of Mrs Glynn ravishing his body? Then again being eaten alive might just as credibly be seen as an expression of his own homicidal impulses, thought Oliver as he looked balefully at the box of dominoes sat on his desk next to his computer.

Oliver opened the expensively crafted box and lifted out an ivory domino tile. They had been a gift from his father when he had first been packed off to *Cheltenham College*. Oliver had wanted a standard double six set with 28 pieces but had received the double nine version more suited to games with four or more players. Out of boredom he had worked out the formula for the number of tiles in any double set: $\frac{1}{2}(n+1)(n+2)$. Thus a double six set had $\frac{1}{2}(6+1)(6+2) = 28$ tiles. Similarly his double

nine set which gathered dust in its box had $\frac{1}{2}(9+1)$
 $(9+2) = 55$ tiles. Fifty five ivory tiles were never used in
a game of dominoes but sometimes Oliver would empty
the box and set the pieces up to topple in a line. Then
he would initiate the

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domino effect and watch the wave of toppling
destruction; the scattered ivory bones reminding him of
his family's collapse.

Labor omnia vincit or *Work conquers all* was the
school's motto. Oliver's father had found the funds to
give him the best education that money could buy but
in truth it had been more about packing an unloved son
off and delegating the responsibility of his upbringing.
Oliver was assigned to *Boyne House* represented by
black and white colours, the binary opposites in a game
of chess. He hated the school, its masters and pupils,
and the regimen of cold showers and healthy outdoor
activity. His antipathy to all sports was sealed following
a fall from a polo pony which had resulted in him
sustaining a broken big toe. *Old Cheltonian* Oliver
looked back on his schooldays with a mixture of
loathing and contempt. *If only* he had been in
possession of a high calibre machine gun he could have
wiped out the entire school from the chapel roof. *If only*,
thought Oliver. Matron had been the only saving grace

in that God-forsaken place; the one spark of humanity and love in an emotional desert devoid of affection.

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Chapter 3 – *Judith and Neville continued...*

Judith had been upset by the news of her father's death but had kept her grief hidden. Already Mrs Glynn had begun to shape Judith's personality, impressing on the young woman that a lady should be self contained and demure. Consequently Judith grew increasingly into herself, though even as a teenager one had caught an occasional glimpse of her physical strength and the passion that burned within. On time when Neville was about sixteen and Judith a year younger the sickly boy had particularly annoyed her with a barbed comment about her adopted status, likening her to the parasitic *cuckoo*. Outraged by this slur she had picked Neville up in her arms like a flimsy rag doll and thrown him on to a grass verge, where he had laid still for a couple of

minutes stunned by this demonstration of Judith's physical superiority. From that day on Neville was always a little frightened of Judith, though he kept his nervousness concealed behind a facade of arrogance and bluster.

Feeling guilty about manhandling her puny charge Judith had tried to make it up to Neville in the weeks following the *cuckoo* incident. In her naivety she thought she knew why he had behaved so abominably towards her. She reasoned that Neville found her sexually attractive but was too immature and inexperienced to articulate his true feelings; his habitual obnoxiousness a distorted manifestation of thwarted erotic desire. There was only one way to test her hypothesis. Judith decided to give Neville some unambiguous encouragement that would leave him in no doubt as to her feelings.

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Timing and location were all important. She had to get him alone in a private place where they wouldn't be disturbed and only then make her move. Such an opportunity soon arose.

One afternoon when the teenagers had been left alone in the garden Judith seized her chance. Standing directly in front of a bemused looking Neville she quickly pulled up her sweater and bra revealing a pair of plump breasts tipped with perfect cherry red nipples.

Heart racing and flushed in anticipation she presented herself to him in all her nakedness. Unfortunately, she was devastated by Neville's insipid reaction. Feeling a sense of shame and outright rejection Judith had quickly rearranged her garments and ran in to the house leaving a confused Neville in her wake. For the next hour she had lay prone in a fit of tears on her bed before the sound of Mrs Glynn's return had brought her to her senses. Judith had returned to the garden as if nothing untoward had happened in the matriarch's absence. In the intervening hour since Judith's abject humiliation Neville had not moved his wheelchair nor changed his facial expression. He never said anything about the flashing incident thereafter and it was only years later on her wedding night that Judith tried again, out of a sense of desperation, to excite a hopelessly flaccid Neville.

Young Neville and Judith grew up in the large family home in Broughton Park; their respective roles and responsibilities clearly established. Daniel Glynn was usually absent working in one of his

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chemist shops or supervising the maintenance of a property in an ever expanding real estate portfolio. It was left to Mrs Glynn to oversee the running of the home and upbringing of the children though Judith was

already doing the physically demanding labour lifting Neville in and out of his chair and pushing it around the neighbourhood where the pair became a familiar daily sight.

The mother, in her supervisory capacity, taught Judith how to sew and needlework became the young girl's preoccupation in the evenings when she would quietly sit in the corner of the lounge while Mrs Glynn and son would play cards or a game of dominoes. Mrs Glynn was never happier than during these scenes of domestic bliss when she would regard her children with such goodwill that it almost brought her to tears. Admittedly, Daniel's premature death at the age of fifty eight, due to a massive heart attack, had come as a complete shock coming only a few years after Judith's father's passing. This event did have a disruptive effect on the smooth running of family life for a couple of months, but Mrs Glynn's steely resolve soon returned and once more her plans for Neville's future came to the fore. It was now her life's mission to make sure that Neville and Judith married, and she didn't have long to wait. Eighteen months after Daniel's passing Judith received her dowry and was free to marry her childhood sweetheart - at least that was how the union was sold to the local community. It was a match made in heaven rather than a matter of convenience and supreme practicality.

Judith and Neville had negotiated puberty and adolescence together in the closest physical proximity and yet not once had there been the faintest flicker of attraction or sexual interest between the pair. After flashing her breasts in the garden Judith had tried to repress her sexual desires and decided that she must be ugly. It was all her fault that men did not want her. Yet in truth Neville's protracted infirmity had thinned his blood and he was to blame. Unlike any normal red blooded male he felt no desire for his female companion when their bodies accidentally touched or he got a whiff of her strong female scent. Neville felt nothing when Judith's large soft breasts brushed against his skinny torso as she lifted him from the chair. Nor did Neville's loins stir at the sight of Judith's shapely female buttocks straining against the fabric of her skirts as she went about her daily chores, bending over to retrieve some household item or perhaps a chess piece that had accidentally fallen from his beloved checkers board. Any other young man would have been smitten by Judith's ripeness and fallen helplessly in love with this voluptuous raven haired beauty.

Months and years had passed and the date for the wedding was finally fixed. It was a small family affair with only the former *Mayor of Salford* and *ex-Detective Inspector* and their respective spouses in attendance. A registry office ceremony with a small reception back at

the Broughton Park family home afterwards had made up the day's itinerary, with a binding prenuptial agreement safeguarding Neville's fortune. Mrs Glynn reminded Judith that this day was what both her father and Daniel had wanted and that they were looking down on

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proceedings from heaven with joy in their hearts.

After the evening meal the guests lingered for drinks and the *Detective Inspector* made lewd inappropriate remarks to the assembled company. Judith in a plain but more flattering dress than usual was an apparition of beauty, a fact that had not escaped the attentions of the lecherous old policeman.

- "Bet you can't wait to go to bed you lucky bugger, Neville", he had exclaimed to all and sundry.

Mrs Glynn had blushed slightly at this indelicate intervention while the bride had merely responded with an indifferent smile. Neville laughed along with the *Detective Inspector*, pleased that he was considered to be a virile specimen of a man with healthy appetites. Yet inwardly he felt no pulsing of the blood at the sight of his beautiful bride who seemed more like a friend and companion than lover. He didn't understand what all the fuss was about sex when one could pursue more

interesting cerebral pursuits like solving chess problems or mastering the nuances of double-entry bookkeeping.

That night, instead of going to her own bedroom, Judith wheeled Neville into their temporary married quarters which had been specially arranged by Mrs Glynn in a converted room on the ground floor. The centrepiece was a brand new *king-sized* bed, a wedding present from the matriarch. As Judith closed the door, the sound of the guests could still be heard from the nearby dining room. Judith wasn't sure or not whether she heard the ribald *Detective Inspector*

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shout obscene words of encouragement; something along the lines of *go on my son*. She inwardly cringed at the thought of such a boorish imprecation. Was fate mocking her and was she to be an object of ridicule from this day on?

Judith undressed slowly after lifting Neville on to the bed. She wore stockings, which had been the suggestion of Mrs Glynn who knew something about the seductive power of *Marks and Spencer's* lingerie; a silk corset and an under-wired lace brassiere completing the ensemble. As she turned to face her new husband on this special night she saw only a pathetic and unconscious Neville, snoring with the hint of an idiot's smile on his quivering lips. Sharing the same bedroom

was the only alteration that took place in Judith's life that night.

The next morning, when the newly-weds reappeared, Mrs Glynn was delighted to see that Neville now exuded a calm serenity. Maybe that was what he had needed all along, the love of a strong healthy woman, thought a pleased Mrs Glynn. Unobserved Judith sat motionless at the breakfast table and retained her sense of indifference. On her wedding night she had left her husband to his slumber and taken the key to the back door. She had stood alone for most of the night in the back garden listening to the silence, while looking up at the dark starless sky unable to raise a solitary tear.

Soon after the wedding Mrs Glynn proposed the move to *The Grange*. At first Neville had been resistant to the idea of leaving the security of the family home which was all he had ever known. Undeterred,

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Mrs Glynn had outlined her plan to purchase adjoining apartments thus guaranteeing the continuance of family life much as before. She also presented her son with a detailed financial break down of all the costs involved in such a property transaction which she had secretly been considering for some months. Neville was eventually swayed by his mother's offer of a generous monthly allowance, which would allow him the opportunity to follow his hobbies in comfort free of

financial worry, and the promise of being the sole heir to Mrs Glynn's estate following her death. For her part, Mrs Glynn would have her children nearby in her dotage, and was sure that Judith as a loving uncomplaining person would tend to her own physical needs as her health inevitably deteriorated. The old lady also hoped that the young couple would have children of their own and had cannily set aside a large sum for such an eventuality. At no stage was Judith consulted on any aspect of the move to *The Grange*. It was just assumed that she would be happy with the new arrangements as a loving wife and daughter-in-law.

Mrs Glynn sat the couple down one evening in the lounge of the Broughton Park house and formally announced the details of her scheme. In truth the decision had already been taken and the deal done, with only a couple of documents held by solicitors requiring her signature. Neville had been the only possible obstacle to her plan and he had been won round to the idea once he had inspected the books.

- "Here's what we'll do", she said to her children.

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Mrs Glynn had Neville's undivided attention while an apathetic Judith had tried with difficulty to cultivate an appearance of interest.

- “The sale of the family home is only waiting for a final signature from me. We will receive a more than generous sum for this property due to the buoyancy of the current housing market. *Flats 1* and *2* are available in *The Grange* for us to move into right away – I have placed small deposits on both properties – and we can more than meet the asking price with a tidy sum left over. The residual amount will more than cover our future needs as a family as long as I am alive and beyond so both your futures are assured. As you know I still own properties that Daniel acquired and their rental income alone will be enough to keep us in relative luxury without having to break into our capital reserves. Are there any questions at this point?”

Both Neville and Judith meekly shook their heads. Mrs Glynn took this as her cue to continue with her presentation.

- “The beauty of us all living in *The Grange* is that family life will continue much as before. Of course, I will respect your privacy as a young married couple but our social life will be just the same. Our wonderful Thursday night get-togethers will continue unabated. So are we agreed about the move to *The Grange*?”
- “Of course we are”, replied an excited Neville.

Judith smiled wanly and nodded her token consent. A week later all the papers were signed and the Glynn family moved into *The Grange en masse*; a local solicitor and his young family moving into the Broughton Park house with equal alacrity. The estate agent responsible for overseeing the sale of the two flats had virtually kissed Mrs Glynn's feet once his double one per cent commissions had been assured. Likewise the solicitors in charge of the legal niceties had taken a generous slice of the financial action in fees. In unison the professional classes of Broughton Park had rejoiced at the seamless and lucrative transition that ensconced the Glynn family in the warm bosom of *The Grange*. There was even a place for Daniel's old silver *Mark 2 Jaguar* in an allotted car space outside the apartments. Though Mrs Glynn seldom drove these days it could be used in an emergency if, for instance, Neville had one of his asthma attacks and needed to be quickly admitted to *North Manchester General Hospital*.

Mrs Glynn was convinced that her children would be more than content in their new surroundings and was overjoyed that she had found a veritable gem in *The Grange*.

- “Look how happy we will be here”, declared Mrs Glynn when she first showed Judith around an empty *flat* 2.
- “We will bring the furniture from the old house so there will be an attractive mix of the old and the new. Of course, we will have to sell some of the old furniture as there won’t be room for everything”, enthused the matriarch.

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Judith did not say anything. When she had entered the dark apartment all she had felt was a sense of foreboding and helplessness. This was to be the hell where she would be entombed for the rest of her life. Mrs Glynn was so wrapped up in decorating and furnishing plans that she failed to notice her daughter-in-law’s complete indifference and feelings of wretchedness.

- “Trust me child: this place will be beautiful by the time that I have finished with it. It looks gloomy now because it is empty and needs a woman’s touch, but don’t forget that it is a very cloudy day today and that is why there is currently a lack of natural sunlight”.

Not before time the old lady noticed Judith’s distinct lack of enthusiasm, which puzzled and then started to worry her. What was the matter with the silly young thing? Why was she being so ungrateful? Perhaps, she

was speechless with joy? Mrs Glynn adopted a placatory approach.

- “Look, I know moving house can be a bit overwhelming but think of the advantages of this place. Everything is on ground floor level which will make pushing Neville around a lot easier, and there will be a lot less housework. In any event I will employ the services of a part time cleaner to free up your time. You will be able to spend more quality time with Neville during the day. Think what fun you will have. I was a young bride myself you know!”

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Judith summoned up a fake weak smile, barely managing to suppress a sarcastic laugh that she felt rising in the pit of her stomach. Once again Mrs Glynn’s usually acute antennae had failed to pick up her daughter-in-law’s negative mood and blissfully oblivious she continued with her upbeat plans.

- “Once we get the best bits of furniture in it will start to look like your home and you can choose new curtains and carpets if you like. And then when the large double bed is set up in your bedroom it will begin to look ever so cosy for the pair of you”, explained Mrs Glynn.

Judith couldn't feign any type of smile at this point such was the cruel and absurd irony of the situation. She merely nodded submissively and impassively.

Neville, who had been inspecting the bathroom during this female exchange, suddenly wheeled himself into the room with an enthusiasm and briskness that matched that of his mother.

- "Yes! This is it. The place will be perfectly satisfactory. I will place my chess board and desk over by the fire, away from the window, and mother will be able to join us for dinner every evening. Judith, you can put your chair over there by the window and the light will help you with your embroidery and *crochet* work. Yes, it's going to be marvellous and Thursday nights will be just like they were at the old house.

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- Mother, I am so happy. Thank you for what you have done for us both."

Neville was genuinely delighted with his new living quarters. He would be warm and comfortable all day as he enjoyed his hobbies and at night he would dine with mother, followed by an early night. If that wasn't perfect enough there was *Thursday's Bridge Night* with the usual friends of the family present. It was the

perfect set-up. Judith felt that the dullness of the flat matched and echoed the morbidity of her future existence as outlined by her equally selfish husband and mother-in-law.

Oliver thought that he was really on to something now with Judith's character developing satisfactorily. Her frustration at being Neville's unpaid nurse maid and living in a sexless marriage was completely understandable and plausible. She had the motivation and a reasonable justification for committing adultery and potentially more sinful acts. Oliver had found the scene in which Judith shoved her bare breasts in Neville's face and then experienced rejection profoundly moving. Personal humiliation was also his biggest fear. The thought of having one's sexual advances rejected was too unbearable to contemplate and filled Oliver's heart with trepidation and sadness. If he ever exposed his feelings to Mrs Glynn and she reacted with hostility or worse indifference then how would he be able to live with the sense of shame and worthlessness? Oliver didn't mean literally expose himself, but rather declare his interest to the

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widow either verbally or in the form of a letter. He thought again of Judith's boobs with those cherry red nipples. Oliver imagined the scene in the garden and

envied Neville. The bloody fool could have reached out and touched Judith with impunity. Judith was a younger less sophisticated version of Mrs Glynn but still irresistible; the same opulent buttocks and bosom straining at the seams of clothing which Oliver imagined to be a couple of sizes too small. Judith was Mrs Glynn when she bent over in the act of unloading shopping from the silver *Mark 2 Jaguar*. Judith was Mrs Glynn when Oliver passed the widow in the hallway and drank in her perfume. Judith was Mrs Glynn. Judith was desire embodied in flesh.

The first and much anticipated Thursday evening *soiree* came round soon enough. The usual cast of characters convened in their new club-house, *flat 2 The Grange*, at *7pm* sharp. The guests included the former *Mayor of Salford* and her husband, and the retired *Detective Inspector* accompanied by his wife. Mrs Burger, the unelected civic mayor from *1990-1993*, was a dowdy little woman with deceptively steely resolve. Devoid of any real political power she had done her best for the people of Salford and not abused her position in the manner of a time serving hanger-on. The council's motto, *salus populi suprema lex, the welfare of the people is the highest law*, was always her watchword.

Having observed Salford's decline over the years and redevelopment in more recent times with *The Quays* and *Media City* Mrs Burger was untainted by cynicism and optimistic about the area's future. Encouraged by friends to run for elected office in *2012* she had nevertheless declined the opportunity and was glad of that decision when the pre-election campaigning became circus-like with the nomination of a local underworld figure. The shady *Mr Big* character didn't prevail despite managing to garner support from five per cent of the electorate and luckily a *Labour Party* crony was duly installed as *Mayor of Salford* with a hefty majority. Generally unattractive and buck-toothed Mrs Burger was a keen *Bridge* player and never missed a Thursday night. She was always accompanied by her

henpecked husband, a weedy retired council clerk, who did not play himself but

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was always content to watch his wife display her mastery of this artful game.

The ex-policeman, Frank Horowitz, was a big burly man with a grey comb-over who liked to dress in double-breasted blazers with shiny buttons and neatly creased grey slacks atop immaculate black brogues. He had joined Greater Manchester police force in the seventies and risen to the rank of *Detective Inspector* in the *C.I.D* based at Old Trafford. Frank Horowitz's career was characterised by highs and lows, being one of the first officers on the scene after the *IRA* bombing of *Corporation Street* in 1996, yet failing to arrest the *Yorkshire Ripper* in 1978 as a young uniformed constable. His commendation for speedily evacuating people from the scene of the terrorist explosion only partially erased the memory of letting Peter Sutcliffe go after he had accosted the serial killer loitering in *Southern Cemetery*. Thirty years as a plain clothes detective investigating the most serious crimes from murders to violent rapes had ultimately resulted in frustration. Horowitz was twice denied promotion to the rank of *Detective Superintendent* and felt increasingly out of step with the new breed of fast track recruits armed with doctorates in Sociology.

A disillusioned Frank Horowitz took early retirement at the age of fifty six and worked part time as a security consultant for various businesses in Manchester including the top hotels, retail outlets and luxury apartment complexes. With his pension and extra consultancy earnings Horowitz was comfortably off; a villa in Portugal and swanky

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Mercedes only part of a valuable portfolio of assets. Horowitz didn't miss the police as it was now with its stifling climate of political correctness. He consoled himself with the thought that at least he had been a serving officer in the golden age of policing; a time when hard drinking men caught ruthless villains and bent the rules if that meant getting the job done. Horowitz missed the sense of power that his position of *Detective Inspector* had conferred. He missed the powers of arrest and search and the camaraderie of his men. Frank Horowitz had always been a man's man but with an eye for the ladies especially in his younger days before marriage began to cramp his style. Horowitz's brunette wife would have been an attractive middle-aged woman were it not for her terribly thin body, though paradoxically she ate like a horse when any food was on offer. Mrs Glynn was convinced that Mrs Horowitz must be suffering from tape worms. How else could she pack so much away and yet remain a borderline anorexic.

Frank Horowitz loved to play cards which he felt lent him an air of sophistication; a touch of the *James Bonds* and *Omar Sharifs*. Like Mr Burger, Mrs Horowitz was a passive spectator while their respective spouses indulged in the game. And so, with Mrs Glynn and Neville making up the four, the Glynnns opposed the Burger-Horowitz axis in the Thursday night mixed doubles showdown. Judith played hostess dispensing food and drinks but took no interest in the weekly sport or her tedious self absorbed guests. Thursday nights always followed the same pattern with the resident hosts and guests engaging in senseless chatter and gossip about politics and the local

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neighbourhood, punctuating the serious business of the card game with its tricks and points and no trumps. It was Frank Horowitz who first raised the subject of security at *The Grange*, while throwing down a three of spades. He addressed Neville who was sat immediately to his left.

- "I hope that you don't mind, Neville, but I took the liberty earlier, before coming here, of taking a quick look around the grounds of *The Grange*."
- "Why would you do that, Frank?" asked a puzzled Neville.
- "Well, you know that as a retired police officer I have expertise in the security field."

- "I'm still not quite sure what you are driving at, Frank."
- "In my opinion this is a very secure building," pontificated Horowitz.
- "We know and that was the main reason why I bought apartments here," chipped in Mrs Glynn.
- "Yes, *The Grange* is very secure apart from the rear of the building where there are no security cameras," continued Horowitz.
- "There is only a service door at the rear of the building and it is a securely locked door. Only residents have keys to that door. I have a key, as does Judith," explained Mrs Glynn.

Judith nodded in affirmation at this point in the conversation.

- "Does your cleaning lady use the key when she puts out the garbage?" asked Horowitz.

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- "Yes, but Peggy gives me the key straight back after using it for that purpose," answered an irritated Mrs Glynn.

Horowitz turned in his chair to address Judith.

- "And does Peggy always return the key to you after she has put out the rubbish?"

- "Yes, Frank. Peggy always gives me the key back straight away. She is completely trustworthy," replied Judith.
- "And I can vouch for Peggy's honesty as well," added Mrs Glynn tersely.
- "Well that sounds all well and good. You can't be too careful these days," replied Horowitz.
- "Frank is right, mother. Remember that cleaner we had at the old house who you had to dismiss?" interjected Neville.
- "Bridie?" asked a slightly flustered looking Mrs Glynn.
- "Yes, Bridie," confirmed Neville.
- "You know that I don't like talking about that, Neville," stated Mrs Glynn sternly.

Horowitz's interest was suddenly piqued, his nose sensitive to the whiff of scandal. Mrs Burger and the other assembled guests were also suddenly attentive.

- "Let me tell the story then," said Neville.

Mrs Glynn shifted uncomfortably in her seat. Her eyes were now downcast.

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- "Bridie was our cleaner at the old house some years back. She came in Monday to Friday for a couple of hours each day and was a trusted member of the household," began Neville.

- "Neville is this really necessary?" pleaded Mrs Glynn.
- "Mother, let me continue with the story of Bridie which is extremely germane to the discussion," said Neville ignoring the note of entreaty in his mother's question.
- "As I was saying, Bridie was our cleaner and given the full run of the house. But unbeknown to Bridie my father had installed hidden *CCTV* cameras throughout the building. Father had valuables and important deeds and other documents kept at home and he was quite rightly a very security conscious man."

Neville paused for dramatic effect.

- "Each night father would fast forward through the video tapes as a matter of routine and then rewind them so that were set up for overnight surveillance purposes. You can imagine his surprise when he saw what dear old Bridie had been up to."
- "Neville, for pity's sake!" exclaimed Mrs Glynn.
- "Apparently, when the house was empty, usually during one of my visits to hospital, Bridie would rummage through my mother's personal effects," stated Neville indignantly.

- "What personal effects are we talking about here, Neville?" inquired Horowitz, hungry for more information.
- "Bridie would try on my mother's underwear and then lay on the bed," explained Neville.

Mrs Glynn brusquely interrupted her son.

- "Enough, Neville. I forbid you to talk further of this matter ever again!"

Neville was stunned by the vociferousness of his mother's outburst. Mrs Burger, noted for her no-nonsense approach, was the first to speak after an agonising period of embarrassing silence.

- "I think we get the picture, Neville. Are we here to play cards or engage in tittle-tattle?"
- "Okay, Mrs Burger. Perhaps you are right. Suffice to say that mother will never entertain indoor CCTV cameras again." quipped Neville.
- "Well, it just goes to show that you can't be too careful when it comes to security." added a laughing Horowitz.
- "We have cameras at the front and I keep watch from my window so nothing gets past me when it comes to the security of *The Grange*," declared Mrs Glynn keen for discussions on the subject of

security to come to a close but Horowitz wasn't finished.

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- "I did arrest a man once who stole women's underwear from washing lines in *Chorlton-cum-Hardy*. When questioned at the station he admitted that he liked to try the items on."
- "Did he explain why?" asked Neville.
- "He said that he liked the softness of the material against his skin."
- "Was that it?" asked Neville again.
- "Pretty much. I can't say that I have ever heard of a woman doing such a thing," said Horowitz.
- "Can we change the subject please?" said Mrs Glynn.
- "Here here," said Mrs Burger.

This was an untypically eventful Thursday night. After the saucy revelations concerning Bridie and Mrs Glynn's lingerie Thursday nights reverted back to their normal unremarkable pattern. Every Thursday at 7pm Mrs Burger and her husband would arrive at *The Grange* and buzz *flat 2* on the intercom. Always first to arrive they would take a seat in the lounge and partake of a small dry sherry while waiting for the other guests to assemble. Frank Horowitz and his beanpole spouse

always came next with the big former detective generally taking centre stage in front of the fireplace. It was a pathetic attempt to cultivate the impression that he was a man of substance and a commanding presence in the room. Mrs Glynn was firmly ensconced in an armchair by this time with Neville parked up in his wheelchair by her side. They were content for Frank Horowitz to hold court during the preliminaries while Judith busied herself dispensing refreshments to the guests.

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The card table, illuminated by bright lamps, held pride of place in the room with its neatly brushed green baize, two fresh packs of cards and scoring pads with freshly sharpened pencils. There really was nothing quite like the atmosphere of *The Grange* on these special *Thursday Nights*.

As soon as she could reasonably do so Judith would retire to her place on the periphery, observing proceedings with barely hidden contempt. Sometimes she would complain of a headache so that everyone would leave her alone to sit by idly, half asleep. The faces of the assembled company drove her crazy. There was buck toothed Mrs Burger, a study in concentration at the card table wearing her customary white blouse under a boring black jacket. Her wire rimmed spectacles glinted in the bright light looking every inch

the school mistress; a previous incarnation before mayoral reign at *Salford Town Hall*.

Mr Burger sat watching from the side with a smug expression, basking in his wife's reflected glory; a pathetic figure afforded a modicum of respect purely due to his wife's achievements. Formally attired in a dark suit with a plain shirt and boring monochrome tie, which restricted his scrawny neck and accentuated the prominence of his absurdly bulbous *Adam's apple*, the ex-clerk sipped at his sherry like a spoiled child with a bag of sweets all to himself. And then there was big Frank Horowitz, the corpulent ex-detective with his fat perspiring belly straining at the shirt buttons, pontificating on

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the state of the nation as if anyone cared what he thought, while his emaciated wife tucked into another plate of *canapés*.

But more annoying than these non-entities and the real focus of Judith's anger were Neville and Mrs Glynn. Sat facing each other at the card table they glowed with mutual adoration and at times seemed to communicate on an extra-sensory level, such was the pair's prowess at *Bridge*. Neville, sat hunched in his wheelchair, holding his cards tightly to his puny chest, was always

engrossed in the game and never happier than at times such as this when he felt that he and mother could take on the world. Mrs Glynn loved Thursday nights as much as her son, these evenings being living proof of her family's success and a vindication of everything that she had planned and enacted. Sat bolt upright at the table this immaculately turned out woman played her cards with expert precision. Usually *Team Glynn* prevailed at the card table but occasionally Frank Horowitz would get lucky with a few tricks or Mrs Burger would somehow manage to compensate for her inept partner.

Bridge is about playing your opponents as well as the cards and Horowitz lacked any insight into the devious machinations of the Glynns. He either overvalued or undervalued his hand which made him an unreliable partner for Mrs Burger who inwardly seethed at his incompetence. All the time Judith would look on at these sinister beings that looked like marionettes in a puppet show acting out a ritualistic display; mere automatons, not one human soul amongst

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them. She wished she could cut their strings, but was resigned to her imprisonment and its theatrical absurdity. At least once during the course of Thursday evenings Judith would excuse herself and take out the

rubbish. This came as a welcome breather from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the card game. The damp air calmed her fever and she would stretch out her absence as long as possible, sometimes taking as long as fifteen minutes. Judith wished that she smoked cigarettes so that she would have a further reason for being alone. However there was a price to pay for the time she spent away from the assembled company. It always caused Neville irritation and he would invariably make a snide comment on her return designed to make his wife feel guilty.

- "Where have you been all this time, darling? You are neglecting our guests."

Nobody would speak up in Judith's defence. They were either too engrossed in the game or too busy watching their partners, or in the case of Mrs Horowitz too busy wolfing down whatever food was on offer. Judith would meekly top up glasses and replenish bowls of nuts and other snacks before slipping back into her solemn reverie, her default setting for Thursday evenings. Invariably Neville would issue a further rebuke in order to assert his authority and impress on his guests that he was the master of the house. This night was no exception.

- "How can anyone stand to be out in the service area for that length of time when the atmosphere in here is so convivial? You are playing well, Frank."
- "Yes, I am giving you two a good run for your money tonight."
- "Keep it up, Frank," chipped in Mrs Burger, amazed that her partner was living up to his bidding and for once wasn't the *dummy*.
- "You can't keep a good man down."

Judith would have to routinely endure this torture until eleven-o'clock but luckily she had developed the ability to tune out her guests' inane chatter.

- "Oh, I've just remembered something that I meant to tell you earlier," said Horowitz, addressing his comments to Neville.
- "I bumped into a chap the other day on *Cheetham Hill Road*, who I think you know from your schooldays."

Neville momentarily diverted his attention from his hand.

- "A chap called Lawrence Ross," elaborated Horowitz.
- "Lawrence Ross! Good Lord," exclaimed Neville.
- "Yes, Charlie Ross's boy."
- "The late Charles Ross, the barrister?" inquired Mrs Glynn.

- "The very same. Of course I knew Charles from his days with the *Crown Prosecution Service*. We worked on several cases together," said Horowitz.

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- "And you saw Lawrence the other day? My, my. I haven't seen him for years," said Neville.
- "Yes, he was asking after you. I told him that I played cards with you and your mother every Thursday evening. He looked intrigued so I took the liberty of writing down his phone number. Thought I would run it by you first before arranging anything," said Horowitz.
- "Yes, of course," said Neville.
- "I remember Lawrence being in Neville's school class. A big tall good looking boy who was good at sports," said Mrs Glynn.
- "Well, he is quite an impressive looking fellow these days. He's over six feet tall and well built," described Horowitz.
- "What's he doing these days?" asked Mrs Glynn.
- "He said something about writing a novel as part of a doctoral thesis at *Salford University*," replied Horowitz.
- "Well there's no money in being a novelist unless you are extremely talented and get a lucky break," said Mrs Glynn.

- "His father must have left him a tidy sum as an only child. He looked quite affluent to me."
- "Then you must invite him here next Thursday. You can ring him and issue the invitation, if you don't mind making the arrangements?" said Mrs Glynn.
- "Yes. Why don't you do that, Frank? Lawrence was one of the few boys at school who was kind to me. We would play chess

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while the others would kick round a football outside," said Neville.

- "Okay I'll ring him tomorrow. It's getting a bit late to do it tonight," settled Horowitz.

The rest of the evening went off splendidly and the Burgers and Horowitzs left in a state of high excitement and elation having memorably defeated the Glynnns. Other *Bridge* venues just didn't compare to *The Grange*, lacking its cosy intimacy and superb refreshments supplied by an always obliging host and hostess. Though Judith got some of the credit for the arrangements it was Neville and Mrs Glynn who received the bulk of any praise that was forthcoming from the guests. *Flat 2* had become an almost indispensable meeting place. In the event of an emergency *The Bridge Club* in Withington on *Palatine*

Road was a last resort option but considered a low rent alternative. Not only was it on the wrong side of the city but as far as Horowitz and Mrs Burger were concerned its members were incorrigibly plebeian. Frankly *Palatine*, or *Palestine Road* as it was jokingly referred to, was out of the question as a credible regular Thursday night venue. The game itself was one thing but *Bridge* was also and perhaps more importantly a social game and a means of maintaining good relationships with the right kind of people.

The date was set for the following week. Horowitz and his wife would bring Lawrence Ross with them the following Thursday. All Judith could think of was the prospect of having to feed and entertain

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another boring guest. In contrast Mrs Glynn was intrigued and excited by the prospect of meeting Charlie Ross's boy. By all accounts the young man had grown into a big strapping fellow and sounded just her *cup of tea*. His father had been a good looking man in his days and had had all the local women chasing after him. Of course she, Mrs Glynn, had never had to chase anyone - they invariably came to her. She remembered Charles fondly as a friend of Daniel's who had come into her orbit at several social events. They had met and she had been struck by his marvellous conversational ability and high powered intellect. Charles Ross QC was a man

of many parts. Mrs Glynn remembered her exact words while watching the barrister undress in the hotel room.

- “There’s certainly a lot more to you than I expected,” she had announced in thrilled tones.
- “I am known in legal circles for my extensive briefs,” Charles Ross had replied amusingly.

Now years later the widow hoped it would be a case of like father like son.

It took a while before Oliver finally stopped laughing at his *extensive briefs* joke. Seriously though, he thought the story was becoming more layered with the introduction of the minor characters. Frank Horowitz was based on his late father who had also been a senior police officer; a man with all the subtlety of a truncheon in the groin.

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And Oliver’s mother had been an amalgamation of several of his fictional females. In some ways his mother had resembled Mrs Horowitz in her timidity but she was also like Judith, a woman adept at playing the uncomplaining hostess whenever his father had unexpectedly invited guests round.

Oliver decided to summarize each chapter as he went along using bullet points as an *aide-memoire*. It was

difficult keeping track of the plot with a written piece of this length.

Chapter 4 Summary:

- The Burgers and Horowitzs are described in greater detail.
- The security arrangements of *The Grange* are discussed and there is another reference to the mysterious back door.
- Neville tells the story of Bridie and her naughty goings-on caught on *CCTV*.
- Judith's contempt for the Thursday night guests is highlighted. She seeks respite by taking out the garbage.
- The character of Lawrence Ross is first mentioned in conversation. Arrangements are made to invite the tall handsome stranger to *The Grange*.
- Mrs Glynn appears excited at the prospect of meeting Lawrence.

Chapter 5 – *Lawrence Ross*

The following Thursday came round soon enough. The Glynnns and the Burgers were comfortably ensconced

and sat sipping sherry in *flat 2* when the door bell rang to announce the Horowitz party's arrival.

- "That will be them, Judith. Be a dear and let them in," asked Mrs Glynn more in the manner of an order than a request.

Frank Horowitz was the first to enter with a tall broad shouldered young fellow who he pushed in to the room with a friendly slap on the back. Mrs Horowitz brought up the rear though it was hard to see her behind the two large men.

- "Neville, do you recognize this gentleman?" asked Horowitz.

Neville looked up at the tall fellow from his wheelchair and scoured his memory trying to match this grown man with the boy he had first known at *King David Primary School*. He remembered a tall athletic dark haired youth who must have been the earlier incarnation of the impressive figure that stood before him. All the time Judith observed the scene placidly.

- "Surely you recognize, Lawrence, little Lawrence, the son of Charles Ross *QC*, the famous criminal prosecutor? You went to school with him," stated Horowitz rhetorically.

As Neville considered his response the rest of the company appraised the newcomer. Mrs Glynn remembered Lawrence Ross well enough,

and was impressed that he had grown in to such a fine figure of a man. She tried to make up for her feelings of excitement and surprise with a stream of maternal memories from Neville's schooldays in which Lawrence and her son featured.

- "My, haven't you grown up," she remarked.

She recounted the lazy summer afternoons when Lawrence had visited and played in the garden with Neville and Judith, omitting to include the real reason why her recollection of those times was still so vivid.

- "It seems like only yesterday that you were a little boy running around the garden at Broughton Park," she sighed wistfully.
- "Yes, they were happy times," said Lawrence.
- "You used to push me round at high speed pretending that we were charioteers in *Ben Hur*," added a smiling Neville.
- "Ha ha. I had forgotten about that," laughed Lawrence.
- "I haven't. You always insisted on making me the Charlton Heston character and took the Stephen Boyd part of *Messala* for yourself."
- "I must have thought that the bad guys were more interesting!"
- "Maybe, but at least I always won the race!" exclaimed Neville.

Mrs Glynn remembered Lawrence's father being a very naughty man. As the children laughed and screamed outside he usually had her pinned down on a bed upstairs with her skirt around her waist. The rutting was always frenzied in those moments of snatched passion. The barrister would hold his hand over her mouth to stifle her screams. Daniel was usually away on business and Charles would take advantage of his absence. It seemed perfectly natural that he should bring his son round to play with Neville at the Broughton Park house. Nobody, least of all Daniel, suspected that Charles or his wife had an ulterior motive for his visits.

Judith also remembered those garden games in which she had been cruelly cast as *Ben Hur's* leprous sister *Tirzah*. Both boys would avoid contact with her in order not to catch the pretend disease and called her *Scabby*. Even though it was all meant as a joke the jibes had hurt, all the more so as she had longed to touch Neville's friend. She later wondered what would have happened if she had shown Lawrence her breasts instead of her husband-to-be, but chided herself for such unwholesome thoughts.

- "This is a special occasion. It's not very often such a handsome chap is in our presence. Not since Daniel's passing at any rate," announced

Mrs Glynn in a playfully innocent way though
under the surface she was salivating with lust.

Mrs Glynn liked men and had never regarded sex as a
sin. It was only natural to find good looking men
attractive and she troubled her conscience no further.
The commandment to procreate, to be fruitful

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and multiply, came from God himself. As a wife Mrs
Glynn had always insisted that Daniel fulfil his conjugal
duties as his part of the marriage contract. With
thoughts of sex in mind the widow slowly crossed her
nylon clad legs, imagining Lawrence naked and in a
state of rigid arousal.

Unaware of the seismic emotions he was stirring up
Lawrence had taken a seat and was calmly taking in his
surroundings. Neither Mrs Glynn nor Neville could take
their eyes of this charismatic young man.

- "Of course I remember Lawrence, even though it
was such a long time ago," said Neville.
- "You still play chess?" asked Lawrence.
- "Yes, of course," replied Neville.

That was enough for the old friendship to resume as
though the intervening years had only been a couple of
days; a blip on an apparently seamless continuum of
intimacy and affection.

- "We must play again but not tonight, alas. Thursday night is card night. Do you play *Bridge* I wonder?" asked Neville.
- "Badly," replied Lawrence. "But we can arrange a time in the week for a game of chess. I would like that very much."
- "I will give you my phone number before you leave tonight. Yes, we must arrange a game."

At this point Horowitz interjected, with more praise for Lawrence.

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- "He's living the life this one. Studying for a post doctorate at *Salford University*. All those young female students you lucky swine. What I would give to be in my twenties again."

Mrs Horowitz, used to her insensitive husband's crassness, paid no heed to the implied insult and continued to munch on a plate of duck *pate* on toast.

- "Please, a drink and a bite to eat for our new guest, Judith," ordered Mrs Glynn. "You'll take a small whisky perhaps, Lawrence? I remember your father liked the occasional single malt."
- "Your memory is impeccably accurate, mother," remarked Neville archly.
- "For certain things it is."

Lawrence had smiled and nodded his assent politely. Judith, who had not spoken, attended to the drink and a plate of snacks. She then began to furtively scrutinise Lawrence, having never before set eyes on a real man. He was so tall and robust looking with dark slightly unkempt hair and a strong jaw line that bore the shadow of a beard adding to his overall masculine appearance. His features were classical with chiselled cheek bones and a long straight nose, while the proportions of his body were aesthetically pleasing on the eye suggesting a combination of power and grace. Quietly sat in her corner chair Judith gazed at Lawrence's thick muscular neck, working her way down to the strong veined hands resting on his lap; the hands of a sculptor or an artist.

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- "What are you studying at the university, Lawrence?" asked a curious Mrs Glynn.
- "I am writing a novel and submitting it as part of a creative writing doctorate," replied Lawrence.
- "You are a writer! Not much money in that," exclaimed Mrs Glynn rather too forthrightly.

Not put out by Mrs Glynn's brusqueness Lawrence explained his situation.

- "Well, my father, who you knew, left me quite a bit of money and I am lucky in being able to pursue my passion which is writing."

- "Good for you, I say," said Horowitz.
- "You must let me have a signed copy when the book is published," said Mrs Glynn.
- "It will be my pleasure," smiled Lawrence.

What a silly boy, thought the matriarch. She couldn't fathom why he hadn't become a top lawyer like his father. Still, if he had money then why shouldn't he write nonsense, and besides he was very pleasant company and quite charming with it. Moreover, and this was the bonus, it sounded like he had plenty of free time on his hands for recreational pursuits; a fact which had not escaped the widow's attention. All this time an unnoticed Judith had continued her detailed examination of Lawrence's body. His clothes did little to conceal his well developed muscles and firm thick flesh. As she cast her gaze from his face down to his muscular thighs she felt a shudder

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travel through her precipitated by the naturalness of his warm guileless smile. Her reverie was only interrupted by her husband's inane attempt at conversation. In a pathetic effort to assert his own manhood Neville had started to outline the success of his free-lance bookkeeping operation, offering at one point to show Lawrence his ledgers. Luckily for the assembled company and esteemed guest Mrs Glynn hastily intervened, embarrassed by her son's inflated claims

about his work which in reality was no more than a hobby.

- “Neville, don’t be a bore. There will be plenty of time for that. Maybe Lawrence will ask you to file his tax returns one day?”
- “I’ll certainly bear Neville in mind,” smiled Lawrence.
- “When you publish your best seller I will salt the proceeds away in an off-shore account,” said Neville.

The room was filled with polite laughter following Neville’s jest, which Horowitz took as his cue to join in the fun.

- “As a former senior officer in the *Greater Manchester Police Force* I did not hear your last remark, Neville. But off the record you may have to advise me on the tax breaks currently on offer overseas!”
- “Really, Frank. I am beginning to see you in a new light,” said Mrs Glynn in a tone of mock disapproval.
- “I would recommend that you invest in the Cayman Islands as the jurisdiction currently offers extremely beneficial tax conditions,” said Neville. “The tax rate is so low in fact to be almost negligible.”

- "It sounds too good to be true," said Horowitz.
- "If you were to buy property there and rent it out your income would be virtually tax free," replied Neville.
- "I think we need to talk in private," suggested Horowitz.
- "For a small consideration that can be arranged," said Neville.
- "You would charge an old friend?"
- "In business there are no friends," smiled Neville.
- "Quite right too," said Mrs Glynn. "Besides Frank, you can afford it!"

The revellers thought this exchange was all very droll. Thanks to the stimulus of a new presence in the room the conversation was flowing and they hadn't had so much fun for ages. Eventually the titters died down and the serious business of the card game resumed. Neville was first to restart the conversation.

- "How remiss of me. Lawrence, I haven't introduced you to my wife, Judith. Surely, you remember her from the Broughton Park house?"
- "I recognized Judith straight away. She used to wheel you around everywhere. The two of you were inseparable," replied Lawrence.
- "I was *Ben Hur's* sister," said Judith with a faint hint of rebuke.
- "Yes, sorry about that," apologized Lawrence.

- "No need for apologies old boy. It was only a game," interjected Neville.
- "Do you forgive me?" asked Lawrence, ignoring Neville.

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- "I'll think about it," replied Judith. "The jury is still out."
- "Well, while the court is in recess is there any chance of me getting my drink replenished?" asked Neville rudely.
- "Certainly, darling. Would anyone else care for a top-up?" enquired Judith, playing the part of the ever dutiful wife.

As he spoke Lawrence fixed his gaze on Judith. He openly stared at her with penetrating eyes that were unsettling in their candour. Judith felt his look bore into her very soul. Its force made her uncomfortable and easily cut through the defences of her habitual indifference. With a forced smile that concealed a palpitating heart and churning stomach she attempted further polite conversation in an attempt to hide this inner sense of turmoil.

- "It certainly is very nice to see you again, Lawrence," realising at once the possible double meaning in such a stiffly formal statement.

Brief pleasantries over she retreated to her chair where she sat for the remainder of the evening in a state of flushed restlessness, while Neville probed his new friend for more information.

- “Didn’t you go down to London after *A-levels*, Lawrence?”
- “Yes. I got a place at *The London School of Economics*. It was my father’s desire that I follow in his legal footsteps and at first I complied with his wishes,” explained Lawrence wearily, as if bored by the recollection.
- “And?” asked Neville, eager for Lawrence to continue.

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- “I dropped out after a year though I enjoyed living in London and being so near to *Covent Garden* and *Holborn*. My heart just wasn’t in studying Law. Father was furious, naturally.”

Lawrence paused to sip at his whisky. He had the attention of the room, particularly Judith, who was already fascinated by this confident sounding man of the world.

- “Well, after a year out travelling round Europe and *The United States*, I decided to enrol on an English Literature degree course at *The University of East Anglia*. Literature has always

been my first love and already at that early stage I had the notion that I might be a published writer one day."

How feckless! Just think if Judith had married someone as irresponsible as Lawrence instead of Neville, then where would we all be? , thought Mrs Glynn.

- "So I graduated with a good degree at Norwich and didn't fancy being a school teacher so I stayed on to do a Masters in English and Creative Writing. They have a good program there and I was under the tutelage of the novelist William Bredbury. You know, the guy who wrote *The Geography Man*?"
- "I think I read that one back in the seventies. Wasn't that the *risqué* book about free love on a university campus?" enquired Mrs Glynn.

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- "Yes. That's the book. Bredbury caused quite a stir at the time," said Lawrence.

Fancy Mrs Glynn reading *The Geography Man*, thought Lawrence. She's a bit of a dark horse.

- "I didn't realize that you read novels, mother," said Neville.
- "There's quite a lot that you don't know about me, my boy," replied Mrs Glynn.

- "I once read *Moby Dick*," interjected Horowitz. "It took forever."

What a buffoon, thought Lawrence, before continuing with his life story.

- "I got my Masters and then went out into the world, trying a succession of different jobs. I fancied myself as a bit of an Orwell type character, living with the poor and the dregs of society. I even had a job as a plate washer at *The Savoy*."
- "And what did your father say about all this?" asked a horrified Mrs Glynn.
- "He threatened to disown me if I didn't get my act together. Luckily for me he died before I was legally disinherited. I think he thought it was just a phase I was going through. I hope that doesn't sound callous of me but father and I didn't really see eye to eye on very much," said Lawrence.
- "Yes, I remember your father being a forceful man, in his opinions that is," Mrs Glynn said.

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- "Your right. He always wanted to get his own way," replied Lawrence.
- "This book you are writing. What's it about?" asked Neville, irked by his mother's hi-jacking of the conversation.

- "A tale of lust, deceit and murder," replied Lawrence who glanced at Judith causing her to blush.
- "It sounds the kind of book that mother would read," quipped Neville.
- "Very funny, Neville. You make me sound like some frustrated old spinster," replied Mrs Glynn tersely.
- "Come come Neville. Your mother is far from looking old or like a spinster," said Lawrence.
- "Thank you, Lawrence. At least somebody has manners," said Mrs Glynn, pleased by Lawrence's comment.
- "Anyway, enough of me. Please continue with your game," said Lawrence.

With only a brief explanation Lawrence's character had emerged. He was a lazy, frivolous man with strong appetites who traded on his good looks and sought easy pleasures. The life of a writer with only a couple of hours a day at the laptop suited his temperament admirably. Like a male beast his powerful body demanded only sleep, food and sexual gratification. What better profession for the idle than that of the *dilettante* writer. Unfortunately the life didn't pay financially and Lawrence knew that without his inherited wealth he would have been forced to get a proper job, perish the thought. His peers at the university were not as lucky and there was even a

rumour that one girl working on her literature doctorate was moonlighting as a part time call-girl working out of *The Hilton Hotel*, a tower block that symbolised excess and which dominated Manchester's skyline. Lawrence had no stomach for such self sacrifice. The world of animal pleasures had left him with urgent lusts which he sought to satisfy at every available opportunity and he was free of religious constraint being only half Jewish on his secular father's side. His had been a liberal rather than dogmatic upbringing.

There had been a recent fling with a black girl from *Moss Side* who he had picked up in a nightclub and seen a couple of times thereafter. For Lawrence the sex had been energetic, exotic even, but the girl had sought more commitment and there had been mention of a jealous ex-boyfriend which had given him second thoughts. Lawrence couldn't be bothered wining and dining girls these days unless they were spectacularly attractive or possessed some peculiar fascination for him. Using internet chat sites he increasingly sought married woman looking for no-strings-attached sex. One or two of these women had been prostitutes who demanded payment but the majority were not after money, settling instead for straightforward afternoon carnality in cut price hotel rooms. Lawrence enjoyed the delicious seediness of his day time assignations but in

truth preferred the corruption of a decent woman to the guaranteed success of his internet dates.

The seduction of a virtuous woman presented more of a challenge. There had been the married public librarian in Norwich, a trim

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bespectacled redhead, who he had worn down after six months of flowers, lunches, and trips to the art house cinema. Eventually she had let him book a room and the subsequent union had surpassed all his expectations. Her finely veined white skin, soft to the touch, was memorable for its translucent beauty. She had taken him that day, panting and moaning, neck tendons bulging with a desperate accusing grimace, as she brought them to a shuddering mutual climax. Just the once had been enough. She couldn't live with the guilt of cheating on her husband and had broken off contact after this one and only act of disloyalty. Out of respect for her wishes Lawrence had started to use another library on the other side of the town.

-“Have you never considered getting married and settling down, Lawrence,” asked Mrs Glynn.

-“I’m still waiting for the right woman to come along, Mrs Glynn,” replied Lawrence.

-“Maybe she has already but you just didn’t notice,” said Mrs Glynn.

-“You know, you may have a point there. We writers do tend to be very self absorbed.”Lawrence summoned up the image of the ginger librarian, myopically appraising his face for some hidden truth, her pelvis thrusting in sweaty, metronomic rhythm.

All this time Judith had been watching Lawrence and listening to his every word. She noticed Neville hand him a piece of paper with their phone number written on it. Judith had not lingered in the service area that night. She had remained seated in her chair, watching this

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stranger, until *11-o-clock* came round and it was time for the guests to leave.

Chapter 5 - *Summary*

- Mrs Glynn is impressed by Lawrence's looks and physique.
- Mrs Glynn remembers her affair with Lawrence's father and one thrilling occasion when they had made love in the afternoon.
- Lawrence and Neville arrange to play a chess game and exchange phone numbers.
- Judith appraises Lawrence having never before set eyes on a real man. There is a *frisson* of mutual attraction between the couple.
- Lawrence declares his ambition to be a published author. He is writing a novel about lust, deceit and murder.
- Lawrence's character emerges. He is a lazy frivolous womaniser.

Oliver liked these end of chapter bullet point summaries but he thought it might be better to include them at the start of each chapter. That way they would guide his writing and help him to stay on track. Of course he then ran the risk of making the novel look and sound like a text book, and later on as the plot developed he may undermine the dramatic tension by giving the game away in advance. Oliver decided that he would keep the use of bullet points under review.

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Chapter 6 – *Summary (in advance)*

- Lawrence visits Mrs Glynn for tea and cakes.
- Now a permanent fixture at *The Grange* Lawrence rents an apartment nearby.
- Judith starts to spy on Lawrence through the window of *flat 2*.
- Mrs Glynn begins the process of seducing Lawrence.
- Lawrence displays initial caution and restraint and resists the widow's flirtatious overtures.
- Neville starts to take his daily chess games with Lawrence very seriously.
- Lawrence sets his sights on the now beautiful Judith and her eventual conquest.

Chapter 6- *Tea and Cakes*

Lawrence started visiting *flat 2* every afternoon after lunch around about *2pm*, ostensibly for a game of chess with Neville, though the convivial and warm atmosphere and the fact that he had nothing better to do were the real reasons. He even partook of tea and sugar-free cakes with the widow Mrs Glynn on Wednesday afternoons, as it was Neville's day at the hospital for his weekly physiotherapy session. This pattern established, Lawrence became a more or less permanent fixture at *The Grange*. He would stay on until late in the evenings and became an integral member of the *Thursday Night Bridge* set though he

would watch the game from the sidelines, joining in the conversation and chipping in with amusing anecdotes without ever dominating proceedings. If asked about the progress of his novel he would maintain that he wrote in the early hours of the morning when it was quiet and he was able to give his thoughts free reign without distraction. This was accepted as fact though in truth Lawrence had not written a word for three months.

Once it became clear that *The Grange* was to be the focus of his social life, Lawrence rented a single bedroom apartment in *Prestwich Village*, only a mile's walk away from *chez Glynn*. It was affordable and boasted a modest living room, with separate bedroom, kitchen and bathroom equipped in the modern style. Coming ready furnished it suited his bachelor needs very well and he had been able to move in at short notice. There were shops nearby, a local public library and a couple of pubs which added to its convenience. Prestwich is one of

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the leafier more affluent suburbs of Manchester and grants easy access to the city. However its middle class facade belies a dual nature, with its lively taverns attracting some rougher elements from the mean streets of nearby Cheetham Hill and Salford. Famous for the Victorian psychiatric hospital which bears its name,

Prestwich is now also associated with *HMP Forest Bank*, a privately run *Category B* prison which lies off the main *Bury Road*, and is synonymous with frequent prison breaks and drone incursions.

In contrast to the area's dark associations Lawrence's next door neighbours were a quiet and polite gay couple who ran a coffee shop in *Sedgley Park*. Brian and Rodger had only been legally married for a year having met two summers previously at Manchester's annual *mardi-gras*. The attraction had been instant and a whirlwind romance was followed by a marriage proposal from Brian during a holiday in *Cancun*. Brian was a great bear of a man who had been previously married to Rita. With their three children the family had lived together in a small semi-detached in Ancoats. Rodger was twenty years younger, of slim boyish build, and prior to Brian had lived a chaotic and difficult life. Coming out had been difficult at his Oldham Comprehensive and there had been very little empathy from his parents or his peers; the general consensus being that Rodger was just showing off. As soon as he was sixteen he ran away from home and lived on the streets of Manchester trying as best he could to make a living as a rent boy operating out of *Chorlton Street* bus station. A succession of disastrous relationships and several beatings at the hands of homophobic ruffians had left him on the brink of

suicide. Meeting Brian had been his salvation and the kind hearted ex-lorry driver had taken Rodger under his wing after finding the distraught young man in tears on *Canal Street*.

The marriage was Brian's idea as he wanted to legally formalize and ensure Rodger's inheritance rights notwithstanding his obligation to his children. The flat in *Prestwich Village* was their first proper home and the couple had loved decorating the place and buying furniture together. Brian had sold his fifty ton articulated truck and used the money to buy the coffee shop in *Sedgley Park*; an area known for delicatessens and *bijou* cafes. They came up with the name *Cafe Ola* which they thought sounded cheerful and European and then spent the next fortnight arguing over whether to add an exclamation mark on the shop hoardings. In the end they went with *Cafe Ola* deciding that *Cafe Ola!* sounded too butch and out of step with the post-modernist *zeitgeist*.

Lawrence popped in *Cafe Ola* two or three times a week *en route* to *The Grange*. He was made to feel welcome with Brian and Rodger always insisting that he sample their speciality of the day. The menu boasted such treats as *lentil risotto* and *baked avocados* which were gratefully received by Lawrence and made all the more palatable for costing nothing. The fledgling business was doing very well with nearby builders popping in for their breakfast baps and a loyal lunch time crowd who

couldn't get enough of Brian's *kosher meat balls* and *halal kebabs*. The newlywed entrepreneurs were doing a roaring trade and could afford to treat their neighbour to the odd free lunch

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in the interests of good public relations. Occasionally the couple threw a party at their Prestwich apartment so keeping the man next door happy was viewed as money in the bank. All things considered Lawrence was very happy with his domestic arrangements being both comfortable and inexpensive. Moreover, he always looked forward to his daily chess game and friendly conversation with the Glynn's and their Thursday night guests.

Each afternoon at 2pm Judith would make sure that she was seated in the shadows of *flat 2*. Now there was a focus for the young woman's vigil with Lawrence never failing to arrive on time. Pausing outside her window he would look straight at her while casually combing his hair. She couldn't discern if he was admiring his own reflection or tacitly acknowledging her invisible presence. The moment was fleeting but almost ritualistic in its predictability and it excited Judith. She experienced a voyeuristic thrill scrutinizing this man's physical features and wanted to reach out and touch him on the face, to let him know that she was there on the other side of the glass. The young people stared at

each other through this two-way mirror of darkness, while Mrs Glynn observed Lawrence from her own concealed vantage point; two sets of female eyes clandestinely observing Lawrence in a visual crossfire. As Lawrence turned from Judith on this particular day he was completely unaware of Mrs Glynn's carefully prepared trap. She had purposely left the French window ajar and a faint breeze rustled the transparent net curtain as the young man approached.

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- "Lawrence, dear, is that you? Could I just speak to you for a moment?"

Lawrence pulled back the curtain and peered into the gloom before stepping over the threshold. Mrs Glynn was sat in her favourite chair directly facing him.

- "Mrs Glynn. How are you today?" enquired Lawrence.
- "Please call me Rachel, Lawrence. After all we are hardly strangers now," she replied.

Rachel! In all the years that he had known her she had always been Mrs Glynn. Lawrence was suddenly struck by the widow's appearance. He had to admit that she looked sensational and wondered if the tight skirt and the figure hugging silk blouse were for his benefit. Get a grip man, he told himself. The woman is old enough to be my mother.

- “Rachel it is then, just between the two of us,” smiled Lawrence conspiratorially.

He sat down in the other armchair in the room.

- “Have you got time for a cup of tea before your chess game with Neville?” asked Rachel.
- “Absolutely. A few minutes won’t make any difference. I think Neville knows that we like to have a chat when the opportunity presents itself.”
- “Good. I’ll make some tea then.”

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Mrs Glynn soon returned with a pot of tea, two cups, sugar, a small jug of milk, a plate of cakes, all neatly arranged on a tray, which she set down carefully on a handily placed coffee table.

- “Shall I be mother?” smiled Mrs Glynn as she started to pour the tea, leaning slightly forward in the process and thus revealing a subtle glimpse of her cleavage.

The promise of Rachel’s bountiful breasts panicked a hot under the collar Lawrence. The situation was already intolerable and he considered walking out on some flimsy pretext, perhaps citing a migraine or an upset stomach. He wanted to get out of the room before he did something that they both might regret. Lawrence had quickly discounted the possibility that

she was just being friendly - this went way beyond innocent affection. He saw that she had given a lot of thought to her clothes and make-up drawing on all her feminine wiles and experience. Lawrence was the one who liked to be in control in these types of situation but it was Mrs Glynn, or rather her sexy alter-ego Rachel, who was calling all the shots.

- "I wanted to thank you personally for the time that you are spending with Neville. It means a lot both of us.

Mrs Glynn rearranged her legs at this point and Lawrence thought he heard the faintest crackle of nylon as her thighs brushed together.

- "It's no problem really, Rachel. I enjoy our chess battles," replied a distracted Lawrence.

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- "And I enjoy our daily chats, especially Wednesday afternoons when we have a little more time," smiled Mrs Glynn flirtatiously, ignoring Lawrence's unintended ambiguity.

Lawrence started to gulp his tea, having politely refused the offer of a *gluten-free French Fancy*.

- "Do you know anything about *DVD* players?" asked Mrs Glynn tangentially.

- “Not really, Rachel. New fangled technology isn’t really my thing,” replied Lawrence slightly taken aback by the widow’s divergent question. “I didn’t think you found the time to watch *TV*.”
- “Well it’s true that I don’t watch it much but occasionally there is a documentary on that I like to record and watch at a later date,” explained Mrs Glynn.

She gestured to the *TV* and *DVD* set up in the corner of the room.

- “I’m having trouble setting the timer,” continued Mrs Glynn.

Mrs Glynn rose from her seat and sashayed the short distance to the *TV*. An entranced Lawrence looked on, noting the contours of the widow’s inverted heart-shaped *derriere*, tightly sheathed in a maddeningly flattering pencil skirt with a slit down the back. Mrs Glynn then turned up the temperature further by getting down on her knees to inspect the *DVD*. It was positioned at ground level causing her to bend forwards, this manoeuvre emphasising the prominence of her shapely buttocks all the more. But it became even

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more torturous for Lawrence when she slowly stretched her legs out behind her and lay flat on her stomach,

ostensibly to peer at the florescent control panel of the *DVD* player. Lawrence was forced to savour the sight of this incredibly attractive mature woman laid prone in front of him on the carpet; her bottom straining against the fabric of her skirt, taunting him in its clearly delineated confinement. Instinctively he wanted to take here forcibly there and then. But Lawrence was a cautious man and resisted what seemed an unambiguous invitation. He would wait and bide his time until Rachel made the first move. Maybe this was just a twisted tease designed to test or entrap. *Softly, softly catchee monkey*, thought a wary Lawrence.

- "It's so fiddly, this machine," said Mrs Glynn, without turning round. "I don't know which knob to press."

Lawrence almost laughed out loud at this blatant piece of innuendo but he wasn't out of danger just yet. With all the wriggling around Mrs Glynn's skirt had ridden up a couple of inches revealing the backs of her shapely knees. The sheer nylon stockings added to the allure and sheen of her superb legs which could have easily belonged to a woman thirty years younger. An admiring Lawrence had to acknowledge that Rachel truly was a miracle of longevity and good genes.

As Mrs Glynn continued to blindly push buttons on the *DVD* console she shifted her weight from one side to

the other and Lawrence felt his heart race at the sight of her mocking haunches. He pictured

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Rachel submissively kneeling between his thighs, her eyes looking up at him in saintly reproach. But then just as Lawrence was about to succumb to lust and make a lunge Mrs Glynn got back up on to her knees and spoke, thus breaking the maddening spell.

- "Lawrence, be a dear, and lend me a hand to get up."
- "Certainly, Rachel. How remiss of me not to offer," said Lawrence clearing his throat with a nervous cough.
- He quickly got to his feet and offered the widow his hand. Pressing her fingers firmly into his fleshy palm and using him as a lever, she rose from her kneeling position and slightly fell forward into Lawrence's anticipating arms.

Gallantly Lawrence steadied Mrs Glynn while all the time keeping her at arm's length. They stared at each other, all too aware of what was happening. They both knew in that instant that they were destined to be lovers such was the strength of their unarticulated mutual attraction. Lawrence spoke first, very matter-of-factly, in order to offset the tension and restore some normality.

- "Well, thank you for the tea Mrs Glynn, I mean Rachel. Neville will be wondering where I have got to. He's itching to try out a new gambit with the white pieces."
- "Yes, how selfish of me. You must get along. Are you still okay for Wednesday afternoon?" asked a slightly crestfallen Mrs Glynn, recovering her composure quickly.
- "Of course, Rachel. I wouldn't miss it for the world," replied Lawrence archly.

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- "Oh good. I'll try and think of a nice treat for you. *French Fancies* don't seem to be your thing," said Mrs Glynn with another suggestive smile.
- "Oh, I'm very easy to please really. Don't go to too much trouble on my behalf," said Lawrence.
- "Don't be silly. If I can't spoil one of Neville's oldest friends then who can I spoil? You men are all the same. I know what you like. Don't forget that I was married for over thirty years," she replied.

Lawrence wiped his brow and exhaled an involuntary sigh of relief as he walked across the hallway and rang the bell of *flat 2*.

Judith answered the door and smiled coyly as she led Lawrence into the lounge. He noticed that the young woman had also gone to the trouble of applying some

lipstick and eye makeup. Lawrence wondered if Judith conferred with Rachel when it came to cosmetic matters or this display was a manifestation of female competitiveness. Undoubtedly, Judith had blossomed into full sensual womanhood in a short period of time; a change not lost on Lawrence and his appreciative eye. She had dispensed with the baggy black cardigan and long pleated skirt in favour of softer fabrics with a more flattering cut, emphasising her hour-glass figure. Lawrence could not understand why Judith had hidden her beauty for so long.

The previous day Judith had taken a morning bus ride into town for the first time in years. She had used her mother-in-law's store card and purchased several new outfits from *Kendal's* department store.

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This purpose built art-deco building situated on *Deansgate* has always been a jewel in Manchester's shopping crown well known as much for its tea shop and make up counter as its quality apparel. Mrs Glynn had been only too happy to pay for Judith's new clothes taking it as a sign that the young woman was happy with married life and wanted only to please her husband by beautifying her appearance. The widow was glad and thought that it was about time the girl snapped out of her lethargy and started to engage with all the joys that life can offer a young wife.

Lawrence realized that Neville was beginning to take their daily chess games seriously when he entered the lounge of *flat 2* that day. His opponent was already seated at the board waiting to make his opening move and wore a look of mild impatience. The board was arranged for the day's game and besides the pieces there sat a chess clock and pieces of lined paper on which to record the moves using chess notation. Neville announced *j'adoube*, I adjust, before straightening his pieces prior to the commencement of hostilities. Lawrence felt like *j'adoubing* his shoe up Neville's back side *en passant*, in passing.

- "I thought we should play under tournament rules," explained Neville. "There's no point playing otherwise."
- "Why not?" replied an amused Lawrence.
- "I thought that I would take the white pieces today," announced Neville. "You don't mind do you?"

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- "Not at all. Make your move, sir," replied Lawrence with an affected theatrical tone.

You competitive little sod, thought Lawrence to himself, knowing that statistically the odds are slightly in favour of the player with the white pieces. Playing first gave only a slight advantage but an edge nevertheless.

Neville pushed his e-pawn to *e4*, *e2-e4*, confidently and with a slight flourish. I bet he's been boning up on chess openings, the devious bugger, thought Lawrence.

Without pause Lawrence replied with *c7-c5* - *The Sicilian Defence*. The idea of subsequently *fianchettoing* his king side bishop was all standard stuff. Moves were then quickly exchanged until the game reached a middle game position that lay beyond the opening knowledge of both players. Neville buried his head in his hands for the first time and began to think in earnest as the chess clock ticked relentlessly.

While waiting for his opponent's next move Lawrence took the opportunity to look around the room. Judith had laid her crochet work to one side and was watching the game intently. Inevitably their eyes met but this time Judith held Lawrence in her gaze for longer than usual and the serial womaniser felt that for the second time that day he was being tacitly propositioned. First Mrs Glynn *aka* Rachel, presenting her backside like a female primate *in oestrus*, and now Judith giving him the come on with those penetrating dark eyes and seductive princess routine. Lawrence knew in that moment that Judith was the one. While not ruling out the possibility of bedding

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Rachel, which would be an exciting and fun way to spend a Wednesday afternoon, Judith possessed youth

and vigour and unquestionably would be the more energetic lover; a riper more lubricious fruit altogether.

- "Would you like some tea?" asked Judith with unusual boldness and clarity.
- "Yes, let me help you," replied an eager Lawrence.

Neville was too absorbed in concentration to notice this brief exchange. Judith rose from her seat first, followed by Lawrence. Again in the space of a couple of hours he felt bewitched by a woman. Her delicate ankles and full calves with a generously proportioned backside smoothly joined her narrow waist that tapered upwards to elegant shoulders forming a perfect harmonious whole. Lawrence looked at the back of Judith's head and wanted to bury his face in that lustrous mass of dark hair while feeling its silky texture and drinking in the rich heady scent of life and vitality.

It had taken Oliver nearly a month to write the preceding chapter. An unforeseen event had thrown him off track and stalled his efforts. Oliver was returning from the newsagents one morning and approaching the main entrance to *The Grange* apartment block. The sight that greeted him through the net curtains of *flat 1*, or what he thought that he saw, had completely taken him by surprise. He had

wanted to stare at the silhouetted shape on the other side of the

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gossamer screen in order to confirm his initial fleeting perception but propriety had forbidden such scrutiny. Oliver had timidly looked away and moved on. What he had seen if it hadn't been a visual hallucination, and he was pretty sure he wasn't losing his mind, was the spectacle of Mrs Glynn stood facing him. She was issuing him a challenge; her legs set rigidly apart with hands planted on hips. Mrs Glynn had been staring at Oliver wearing nothing but her underwear. Convinced that his eyes had not been playing tricks he wondered if he had simply caught the widow by surprise. After all a woman was entitled to walk around her apartment in a state of semi- undress especially if the curtains were drawn. Oliver began to feel more tortured and distracted than ever and it was only with a supreme effort of will that he was able to take his seat at the computer once again. He soon decided that he would dispense with the cold bullet point summarising of each chapter. It was too mechanistic a device and would have been anathema to his literary hero, *Emile Zola*. But had the Gallic maestro ever been plagued by the persistent image of a widow dressed only in black lingerie? Oliver somehow doubted it.

Chapter 7 - *Weighing the Odds*

The kitchen in *flat 2* was a modest affair. It was joined to the lounge in an open plan arrangement but was shielded from view for the most part by dint of a partition wall. The small galley was in effect tucked out of sight around a corner and could not be seen from the perspective of the lounge. Guests sat at the dining table would be unaware of where the food they were being served actually came from unless they actively sought out the kitchen recess. Still, the little annexe was a marvel of design with space at a premium. There was a cooker, fridge, microwave, kettle and everything else one would expect in a modern kitchen, albeit of cramped design. As Judith and Lawrence entered this confined space it was inevitable that their bodies would be drawn into close proximity. Lawrence accidentally brushed Judith's thigh as he passed to get the milk from the refrigerator.

- "Excuse me for being clumsy," apologized Lawrence.

Judith said nothing. She merely smiled as her face and neck reddened. Her awkwardness made Lawrence want her all the more and for the second time within an hour he considered grabbing a woman and smothering her with kisses. But fate once again intervened and made the decision for him.

- "I've moved, Lawrence. It's your turn," piped up Neville in a *false* voice from the far depths of the lounge. "Any chance of some tea, my dear?"

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- "We are just making it," replied Judith. "Lawrence is helping me."

The young man and woman smiled at each other as the tea pot and cups were arranged on the tray.

Lawrence returned to his seat at the board following Neville's latest move. The smug little bastard had a clear edge, conceded Lawrence, who in truth was the more talented player of the two. Their respective styles of play mirrored their different personalities, with Lawrence's bolder more attacking approach usually prevailing over Neville's stolid cautious defensive strategy; the man of action overwhelming the book clerk. But today Lawrence was understandably distracted and Neville had a clear winning position if he didn't blunder in the remaining moves. As Lawrence tried to come up with the least bad move in an attempt

to draw out the game as long as possible his mind wandered to non-chess matters.

The next time I see Mrs Glynn, Rachel, I could slip her my phone number and we could arrange a meet? , he mused. It might be too risky sleeping with her in *flat 1*, but maybe my place or a hotel? How to do it subtly, without arousing suspicion, was the question, considered Lawrence as the chess clock ticked relentlessly. *Chess* was definitely the last thing on Lawrence's mind as he continued to plan out his human moves both tactically and strategically. It would be best to meet up on Wednesdays when Neville went to the hospital. Perhaps Judith could be tempted to accompany him? Then Rachel

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could slip away for the afternoon unobserved, but was he getting ahead of himself? Was he completely misreading the signals and why was he thinking of Rachel when Judith was the one that he really wanted? Yet, Rachel was a very sexy woman in her own right and these days age was no barrier especially if matters were handled discretely. There was definitely a touch of the *Mrs Robinsons* about the whole affair which added spice. Moreover, the widow was a wealthy woman and it wouldn't harm his financial prospects to take her as a lover. Handled carefully the bedding of Mrs Glynn could only work to his advantage. Yet giving his phone

number had to appear a completely innocent act. That way if Rachel had been playing a game then no harm would be done. Lawrence knew what he had to do.

For appearances sake he played on for a few moves before accepting the inevitable. Gently Lawrence tipped over his King with his left hand pinkie.

- "You met your match today," exclaimed a jubilant Neville.
- "Yes. Well played," replied Lawrence, glad that the game was finally over.

Judith, who had been quietly watching from the sidelines all this time, was struck by Lawrence's magnanimity and manly dignity in defeat. It was only a game and Lawrence treated it as such but for Neville it meant everything; Neville the competitive child with no sense of perspective or conception of what really mattered. Lawrence and Judith's eyes met once more across the room as an elated Neville, drunk with the intoxication of victory, packed away his chess pieces.

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Lawrence knew that something had just happened in the kitchen. He knew instinctively when a woman wanted him; the signs were obvious. She was a nervous trembling wreck when they got physically close to each other. He wondered whether he should take her in his arms at the next opportunity. She always seemed to be

sizing him up with those eyes. Silent and passionate, it was clear that her fires burned deep. She couldn't be getting any satisfaction from Neville. Look at him for pity's sake, thought Lawrence. An oblivious Neville wheeled himself across the room, unaware of his friend's scorn, and placed his chess set on the bookcase. She's bored. Anyone would be. She likes me. Why not me? I'll kiss her the first chance I get, decided Lawrence.

Lawrence left *The Grange* early that day. He had a lot to think about. Besides, he was beginning to tire of Neville and his inflated sense of himself following his chess victory. Lawrence took Mrs Glynn's arrival for his cue to leave. Their paths crossed in the hallway of *flat 2*.

- "Surely, you are not leaving us so early tonight, Lawrence?" enquired a disappointed looking Mrs Glynn.
- "Unfortunately, I have to go, Rachel," replied Lawrence confident that his use of the widow's first name was out of earshot of Neville and Judith. Mrs Glynn smiled at this small display of intimacy.
- "You must be keen to get on with your novel?" suggested Mrs Glynn.

- “Yes, I have one or two ideas that I need to get down on paper,” replied Lawrence. “Talking of which.”

With that he handed Mrs Glynn a piece of paper with his phone number written on it.

- “It occurred to me that you didn’t have my contact details,” explained Lawrence.

Mrs Glynn looked momentarily flustered and at a loss for words. Lawrence, sensing her discomfort, came to her assistance.

- “In the event of you having to cancel our Wednesday afternoon tea for some important reason? You never know. Things happen at short notice sometimes,” explained Lawrence.
- “Yes, I suppose you are right. The strangest things can happen. Thank you,” replied Mrs Glynn who took the note and coyly placed it in her handbag.

Lawrence didn’t sleep very well in his Prestwich apartment that night. His disjointed thoughts switched violently between fantasies of Rachel and Judith. In one particularly vivid scenario all three of them were entwined in ecstatic copulation, with Neville looking on greedily from his wheelchair, wiping his spectacles in order to get a better view of proceedings. Realistically Lawrence calculated the possible outcomes of sleeping

with Mrs Glynn and Judith as separate propositions. He had ruled out the possibility of a *ménage-a-trois* which smacked of wishful thinking and in any event would present

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nightmarish logistical difficulties. No, one at a time would be sufficient for his needs, he pragmatically concluded reluctantly conceding that he wasn't an undergraduate student anymore. Life was complicated enough without introducing complex variables into the equation!

Increasingly he was warming to the idea of bedding the widow. Maturity certainly had a lot going for it as Mrs Glynn would definitely keep an affair quiet. She had too much to lose in terms of her standing as a respected member of the local community. Mrs Glynn was married to status and wouldn't risk this bond through any indiscretion that might become public. Lawrence sensed that the widow wanted uncomplicated and secret sex; to give full expression to her physical and emotional desires which had lain dormant and had been suppressed for so long, or had they? The widow had let slip that she had read *The Geography Man*, which wasn't exactly standard reading for your average spinster. Perhaps this wasn't the first affair that she had indulged in post-Daniel, but who would she have had a relationship with? Frank Horowitz presented an absurd

possibility as did Mr Burger and she was surely too choosy and careful to go for a blue collar maintenance man called out on emergency repair. But what did he really know about Mrs Glynn or Rachel beyond the respectable persona that she affected? There was only one thing that Lawrence was certain of and that was the strict demands made on Mrs Glynn by her public image; the importance to her of having an unblemished, untarnished reputation.

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Judith on the other hand presented a different challenge, but there were similarities between the two women. Like Mrs Glynn an affair with the young wife would cost Lawrence nothing and she also had a lot to lose, not least a marriage and a home. He was bored with his part time harem of needy online cheaters who set him back a pretty penny with drinks and hotel rooms having to be factored in to the reckoning. Both of the Glynn women could hopefully be lured back to his Prestwich apartment, thus saving on costs, or he could take the risk of bedding them in *The Grange*, provided Neville was somehow absent or otherwise engaged. Lawrence needed excitement and the satisfaction of his needs and here were two women seemingly desperate for his attentions. It would be rude of him not to accept their amorous invitations, given Neville's inability to satisfy his wife's needs and Mrs Glynn's obvious frustrated longings. After all, what was the worst thing

that could happen? He knew that he could drop either of them at a moment's notice if the affairs became tiresome, and he could always leave town and head back down to London. As for Neville, the puny weakling presented no threat. Even if he caught them in *flagrante delicto* Lawrence was unworried about the consequences.

By the time Lawrence woke up the next morning he had settled on his plans. The Glynn women would attend to his enjoyment. Ideally Mrs Glynn would take care of Wednesday afternoons, preferably at his place, while the rest of the week could be earmarked for the seduction of Judith. Once a week would be enough for the widow, which he could justify to her on the grounds of prudence, but the

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young woman might need daily attention once she got a taste of the forbidden fruit he was offering. However, these were mere details that could be arranged in the future with a little ingenuity. The practical difficulty that presented itself right now was how to get the women on their own, in a way that would not draw suspicion from Neville who notwithstanding his many weaknesses was not a complete idiot. Mrs Glynn had her own apartment but there was always the risk of her children dropping in unexpectedly from across the hallway and then there was the more intractable problem of isolating duty

bound Judith. Lawrence had to get Judith to go out more often and spend time away from Neville without it in any way appearing abnormal. Already, there were encouraging signs that she was beginning to act more independently with her increasingly frequent shopping trips in to Manchester. Moreover, on Wednesday afternoons Lawrence knew that Neville was out most of the day at the hospital.

If he could somehow slip into the building on Wednesday afternoons, unobserved by Mrs Glynn, then he and Judith would be alone. But there was a double booking problem. What about his tea and scones get-togethers with Rachel? Maybe he would have to alternate the women on Wednesday afternoons, coming up with an excuse to cancel his date with Mrs Glynn before secretly meeting Judith? Lawrence was pretty sure that Mrs Glynn would not reject his advances when the right time presented itself. Had he not made another step forward in their growing intimacy by handing over his phone number? The odds of seducing Mrs Glynn were definitely

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favourable, yet he had not established the same physical connection with Judith by holding her in his arms. The next time they were alone in the kitchen he vowed once again that he would seize the initiative. In the meantime it was important to keep up the innocent

looking routine of chess games in the afternoon, tea and cakes on Wednesday afternoons, and the predictable evenings in *flat 2* with *Bridge Night* on Thursdays. Lawrence would wait patiently for his opportunity and hoped that Mrs Glynn would call. Then he would be certain of at least one conquest.

Time passed. Mrs Glynn had not called and Wednesday afternoon came around. Pausing only for a *skinny late* at *Cafe Ola* Lawrence made his way from his Prestwich apartment to *The Grange*. At least he didn't have to play Neville at chess today, he consoled himself. Their daily encounters over the board had become boring and his apathy was reflected in his recent poor playing form. Neville had started to prevail with both the white and black pieces and the victor's subsequent crowing had made the invalid even more contemptible.

Lawrence was beginning to hate Neville and he entertained violent fantasies as he sat opposite his chinless former schoolmate. What fun it would be to tie the weakling up in his wheelchair and ravish Judith and Rachel in front of him on the lounge carpet. That would show the cocky little bastard, when he was bedding both his mother and wife. Just you wait, thought Lawrence as he had resigned in yet another hopeless position.

Lawrence arrived at the outer gate to *The Grange* complex and entered the car park. As he came to the window of *flat 2* he paused to comb his hair and adjust his appearance in his usual ritualistic fashion. Peering at the dark reflective glass he wondered if Judith was watching him. He knew Neville was currently undergoing a physiotherapy session at *North Manchester General Hospital* but where was his wife? He imagined the two of them alone and the opportunity that would present for an afternoon of illicit sexual delight. While Lawrence considered this delicious scenario Mrs Glynn looked on through net curtains. Seeing the strong young man turn and approach with a confident stride she hurriedly made her preparations.

The large sliding windows to *flat 1* were slightly ajar and the lace curtains flapped gently against the door jamb as Lawrence arrived at the threshold. Announcing his presence he entered, expecting to see the widow in her usual chair, but the room was empty.

- "Mrs Glynn?" he called out. "Am I early?"
- "Through here, Lawrence dear. Be an angel and shut the window," replied Mrs Glynn from another room.

Lawrence slid the windows shut and turned to the source of Mrs Glynn's voice. What was she doing? Had she forgotten about the tea and cakes? Once more the widow had broken the silence.

- "Come in the main bedroom Lawrence. I have something to show you."

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As Lawrence entered the bedroom he saw the widow waiting for him. Stood proudly erect, she was wearing only a black *basque* and matching stockings. Her hair was immaculately teased into a silver bob with lips painted in bright red gloss; a hint of grey eye shadow, lashes deftly blackened by mascara. Slowly Mrs Glynn started her strip tease as Lawrence looked on in a state of enrapture, an audience of one. The temptress skilfully unclipped her suspenders with two at the front and slightly more awkwardly two at the back necessitating the bending of her shapely legs. Lawrence was transfixed by the fullness of Mrs Glynn's matronly thighs partially sheathed in nylon, their whiteness accentuated by the opaque darkness of the stocking tops. Tentatively she began to pull down the shoulder straps of her bodice which was made of some delicate silk like material embroidered with dark rose shaped flowers. Mrs Glynn paused to smile at Lawrence as she wriggled slowly out of the figure hugging corset revealing the tops of her still ripe breasts that only faintly bore the ravages of time.

- "Be a dear, and unhook me at the back will you?" asked Mrs Glynn coquettishly as she turned away from her dumbstruck admirer.

Lawrence fiddled with the hooks and catches nervously before releasing the constrictions of the corset and stepping back a pace. Discarding the bodice on a bedside chair she turned to face him.

- "I want you to be rough with me, Lawrence. Do you understand?"

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Lawrence nodded and with a wolf-like grin hastily undressed...

At 4pm the ambulance pulled into the car park of *The Grange*. Mrs Glynn was the first to notice its return.

- "Oh look Lawrence. They are back. Try to look less guilty, my dear. You have only been drinking tea and eating cakes with an elderly widow. There's no need for anyone to know about our other fun and games."

Lawrence smiled and nodded. Some elderly widow, he thought exhaustedly. She had certainly put him through his paces that afternoon. At first he had risen to the challenge taking on the attractive widow with zest but after the second and then the third time his only wish had been to escape her frenzied clutches. Mrs Glynn was a woman possessed in the bedroom; a phenomenon of insatiable lust and desire. She had handcuffed him to the corners of her four poster bed with pink furry manacles and ridden him for two hours

like a *Grand National* jockey. Gripping him with her powerful thighs she had steadied herself with one hand pressed against the wall as her breasts had slapped him across the face to and fro. Asphyxiation had been a very real possibility at one point as he had gasped for breath in the face of Mrs Glynn's merciless assault. Lawrence had also suffered bites and scratches all over his body as the widow had scaled the heights of sadistic ecstasy again and again, eyes closed with strands of silver hair plastered across her pained face with sweat. If he could have escaped his restraints he would have hurled the deranged she-devil across the room. Yet the whole

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experience had been oddly cathartic and energising like the feeling one gets after a punishing work out. He felt distinctly alive and spiritually refreshed. Sex was now the last thing on his mind but he was still oddly excited at the prospect of seeing Judith and felt his loins tingle in anticipation. The ambulance suddenly jerked to a halt and Lawrence knew that Neville would be bemoaning the driver's lack of care in his usual high pitched whine. Neville could be a downright moaning bastard which had been a trait apparent since childhood. It had not been so obvious what his mother was really like as a person so convincingly authentic had been her public persona. Now Lawrence knew with certainty that this respectable pillar of the community and seemingly

impeccable widow was a raving nymphomaniac. What other secrets were contained in *flats 1* and *2* Would Judith turn out to be as depraved as her mother-in-law? Lawrence put such thoughts to one side for future consideration. Composing himself he got into character; the dutiful friend to Neville and regular guest of the Glynn family who had just enjoyed tea and cakes with the elderly widow and mother, Mrs Glynn.

- "I think that I better help push Neville indoors," suggested Lawrence.

Through the window he saw the tail gate of the ambulance being raised by the driver and Judith could be seen sitting next to Neville in the back of the vehicle. Sure enough Neville was gesticulating angrily in the direction of the driver.

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- "Why not Lawrence? You have been ever so attentive towards me today," replied Mrs Glynn suppressing a girlish giggle.

Lawrence smiled unconvincingly at the unhinged widow and pulled back the sliding door. As he approached Judith was reversing Neville away from the ambulance.

- "Here, let me take Neville," said Lawrence removing Judith's hands from the wheelchair grips. "I've been waiting for your return."
- "Has mother been a bore? She will make you fat with all those cakes she keeps feeding you," teased Neville.
- "Your mother is far from boring, Neville," replied Lawrence. "On the contrary we have spent the most stimulating of afternoons."
- "Really? What did you talk about?" asked Neville.
- "Oh this and that. About you amongst other things," replied Lawrence eager not to get caught out at a later date by being overly specific. "Anyway, we need to get you inside. Fancy a game of chess?"
- "You are not getting tired of me trouncing you, then?" replied Neville.
- "Never," said Lawrence.

Judith gave Lawrence a warm smile as the young people entered *The Grange*; all three waving cheerfully to Mrs Glynn who stood watching the procession from the window of *flat 1*. The regal looking widow

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was already looking forward to her next session with Lawrence. Like his father before him the young man was very well endowed and she was determined to have plenty of fun with her new stud. She didn't care

where or at what time but have her pleasure she would. By the time she had finished with him he would have nothing left to give. Lawrence would be a dried up husk fit only for the *knacker's yard*. Mrs Glynn smiled at this vulgar though apposite thought. People really had no idea what she was like. In ancient times she would have been a wealthy patrician's wife sleeping with gladiators for kicks or taking part in orgies with prostitutes and deranged dwarves. Sex always made her feel so alive but Neville's joy gave her the most pleasure of all. She would have hung up her suspender belt for good if she thought that act would guarantee her boy's wellbeing. Still, his future was now assured and her job almost done. Mrs Glynn was now free to pursue her personal interests with discretion and enjoy a lusty retirement.

Lawrence was alone with Judith in the kitchen while Neville was occupied in the bathroom. Judith had suggested making some tea. As she bent down to get some saucers from a cupboard she began to visibly shake. This is the moment, realized Lawrence. She turned and they stood face to face. Violently he pulled the woman to his chest and crushed his mouth against hers. Judith put up token resistance before greedily kissing Lawrence's face, running her fingers through his thick tousled locks. Seizing the initiative he grabbed her buttocks with both hands and began to grind his tumescent manhood against her pudendum, lifting her skirt and working his way under the elastic

fabric of her undergarments with his strong fingers in order to touch her soft yielding flesh.

- "I love you," declared Lawrence in a hushed voice that trembled in its intensity. "We must be together."

Judith nodded in breathless assent but hastily started to rearrange her dress at the sound of a toilet flushing in the background. Grabbing her face in both hands Lawrence gave her one last passionate kiss.

- "Soon," he said. "Wednesday."
- "Yes," she replied. "Wednesday."

The chess game had begun.

- "Your move," said Lawrence.
- "I know, I know," replied a testy Neville.

For some unfathomable reason Lawrence was playing with the skill of a grandmaster. The game was already won and he could have administered the *coup de grace* a couple of moves earlier. Let the bastard suffer, thought Lawrence. Neville was going to lose the game on time if he didn't move soon but his position was hopeless either way. What a day, thought Lawrence.

Neville made a pathetic move that Lawrence had foreseen half an hour earlier. The invalid pushed his

bishop forward as though it was charged with some latent power. In truth Neville was bluffing and

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Lawrence accepted the challenge dismissively. He once more forced his opponent into a prolonged bout of futile concentration.

Who would have thought it? First a bruising encounter with a sadomasochistic widow and then a groping session with the sultry frustrated wife. At that precise moment Neville glanced up at his opponent and mistook his opponent's smug expression for chess related triumphalism. In return Lawrence looked at the hapless cuckold with a mixture of pity and contempt. He laughed at this sap sat before him; a man doomed to defeat who nevertheless carried on oblivious to the true state of affairs. What a naive child he was to be so unversed in the ways of the world. Why had he allowed another man to make love to his wife? It was purely through his own neglect and naivety that Judith was going to stray, and as for his mother's cunning.... he just didn't have a clue what people were truly capable of. His respectable mother, a paragon of virtue, so prim and proper! What a joke. She was the one who had meticulously arranged their sordid sex encounter, first making sure that both her children were out of the way for the afternoon. She must have persuaded Judith to accompany Neville, so that the coast would be clear.

You had to hand it to the scheming old bitch,
acknowledged Lawrence with begrudging respect.

Lawrence made his excuses again that evening and
once more left earlier than usual. The day had been
eventful and tiring, with the bruises to prove it, and he
needed time to think. Leaving *flat 2* he had

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formally shaken Judith's hand as a secret sign of
intimacy and a seal on their decision to meet on
Wednesday.

It was still early evening but *The Grange* was
nevertheless under cover of darkness. Exiting the
building he took the opportunity of inspecting the
grounds unobserved. Turning to the right instead of
heading straight out of the main gate he circled round
to the back of the complex. Here he spotted the
garbage bins and the service door which logically had
to grant access to the block. He tried the handle on the
door but it was locked as expected. Looking around to
make sure that he wasn't being observed he was
reassured to see that all of the windows at the rear
were made of frosted glass. The positioning of the
opaque bathroom and toilet windows concurred with his
sketchy knowledge of the internal lay out of *The
Grange*. Less fortuitously he also noted the high

perimeter privets which would be impossible to climb over. But just as he was about to give up on the idea of gaining access to *The Grange* from the rear he noticed a small gap in the hedge.

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The preceding chapter had been the most difficult to write so far with Oliver having to take frequent breaks, but on the plus side the mounting tension in the story was becoming palpable. Even he wanted to know what was going to happen next. Lawrence had bedded Mrs Glynn, a raving nymphomaniac with *S&M* predilections, and there was the expectancy of his forthcoming Wednesday afternoon tryst with Judith. As an author Oliver had to be careful now to not let the plot over-boil. He wanted to ensure that the proposed novel length piece of fiction didn't peter out and end up as an extended short story, yet he had to keep his readers engaged. Writing a book of this length was a marathon rather than a sprint but one always had to use the box-

office trinity of sex, violence and information. The novel was proving to be the most difficult task that Oliver had ever undertaken, calling on vast reserves of patience and perseverance as well as being physically demanding. He was still suffering sleepless nights and had an appointment booked with a dentist to try and do something with his worn down lower set that now looked like withered stumps. There hadn't even been the consolation of spying on the widow. Oliver hadn't seen Mrs Glynn going out much recently which was unusual and frustrating. In contrast the same blue overcalled engineer seemed to be working in *The Grange* every day as his van was an ever present in the car park. Oliver was sick of the sight of his *Cheshire cat* grin as he strode towards the building whistling some inane popular tune that was annoyingly catchy and familiar. Somebody in the block was clearly having problems with their plumbing or central heating.

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Oliver was glad that it wasn't his apartment as that really would have been a distraction from his writing. At the same time Oliver was longing to see the widow again purely for research purposes.

Chapter 8 – *The Routine*

Thursday was *Bridge Night* and the Horowitzs and Burgers were present as per usual. Before the serious business of the card game started Mrs Glynn spoke to Lawrence openly in front of the assembled company.

- “Oh, Lawrence, you have just reminded me of something. I sorted out a couple of books for you the other day that I thought might be of interest.

Can you come and get them as I rather stupidly put them on top of a wardrobe and they are a bit difficult to reach? I'm such a silly head."

- "Now?" replied Lawrence.
- "Yes, if you don't mind. Before we start our *Bridge* game," said Mrs Glynn.

Lawrence followed Mrs Glynn out of the apartment and across the hallway. No sooner had Mrs Glynn closed the door to her flat behind them than she launched herself at the young man, grabbing him round the neck and smothering him with kisses. She sank to her knees and started to unzip his trousers.

- "This is crazy. We will get caught," beseeched Lawrence.

The widow ignored his plea and Lawrence gratefully acquiesced. It didn't take long - ten minutes later Mrs Glynn led Lawrence back into the lounge of *flat 2*.

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- "We were going to send out a search party," joked Frank Horowitz.
- "Well, I have some interesting reading material and Lawrence took his time before choosing something," replied an unflustered Mrs Glynn.
- "What have you got there?" inquired Horowitz of Lawrence who was holding a book.

- "*The Geography Man*," replied a smiling slightly bashful Lawrence.
- "The porno book!" exclaimed Neville. "How very droll of you, mother."
- "That's what they said about *Lady Chatterley's Lover*," retorted Lawrence.
- "Yes, but I doubt that *The Geography Man* will be hailed as a classic work of literature in fifty years time," said Neville.
- "Well, I thought it was very well written," said Mrs Glynn.
- "The pages certainly look very well worn," said Horowitz.
- "What are you implying, Frank?" replied Mrs Glynn. "It was a second hand copy when I bought it."
- "It is very thoughtful of Mrs Glynn to think of me," interjected Lawrence, eager to come to the widow's defence. "My own novel focuses on similar themes to the ones explored in *The Geography Man*. It is a timely moment to read the text again."

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- "A case of art imitating art perhaps?" said Neville, pleased with his witticism.

- "Exactly," replied Lawrence. "Once again, thank you for the book Mrs Glynn."
- "Think nothing of it, Lawrence," said Mrs Glynn. "Let's hope it gives you some fresh ideas."
- "The fresher the better," laughed Horowitz.

The next few days passed slowly. Lawrence couldn't get Judith alone. Every time she went to make tea either Mrs Glynn or one of the *Bridge* set would volunteer assistance which was annoyingly untypical. After what seemed like an interminable build up Wednesday finally came round. Lawrence had had plenty of time to formulate his plan which he now mentally rehearsed once more: I will arrive at *The Grange* at approximately midday and hide out of sight round the corner. Once I see the ambulance carrying Neville leave I will make for the gap in the hedge. It will be a squeeze but I should be able to get through and thus gain access to the rear of the apartments. Mrs Glynn won't be expecting me until *2pm* and besides the gap in the hedge is out of sight from her *flat 1* vantage point. Then I will phone Judith and get her to open the rear service door. We will have two hours alone before I have to leave via the hedge again for tea and cakes with the widow. It seemed fool proof and sure enough the plan worked.

As arranged Judith came to the rear door and let Lawrence in, five minutes after Neville's departure. She had feigned illness in order to

be left at home but had had to draw on all her acting powers. Mrs Glynn had been quite insistent that Judith accompany Neville and had only reluctantly given in when faced with the young woman's flat refusal to go with her husband to *North Manchester General*.

Once inside *flat 2*, Judith hastily led Lawrence by the hand to the spare bedroom. Removing her house coat she reclined naked on the bed while Lawrence quickly undressed. Her dark hair which fell about her shoulders contrasted with the whiteness of the sheets that had been freshly turned back. The bed itself was old fashioned with a dark wooden headboard against which Judith lay propped up by two large pillows. She held him in her gaze with the hint of a challenging smile. She was saying unambiguously, here I am, I am your woman, take me. Needing no encouragement Lawrence climbed on to the bed beside her, which creaked under his weight, and held her face in his strong manly hands. Her dark eyes met his and her red lips parted to admit his tongue. They fell upon each other like hungry animals, kissing and groping, kneading each other's flesh as if the ferocity and intensity of the act would somehow fuse them in the act of love.

As Lawrence drove powerfully, piston like, into the young woman's hot yielding sex the bed springs creaked noisily, and the antique headboard rammed

almost comically against the wall. Anticipating the soundtrack of love Judith had earlier switched on Neville's record player. It blasted out *Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto Number One* from the lounge and filled the apartment with a classical fugue masking the couple's escalating screams and groans. Viewed from above

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Lawrence's muscular back arched upwards as Judith's legs wrapped tightly around his lower torso, unwilling to let him go in the spasms of mutual ecstasy.

Next door at that precise and exact moment Mrs Glynn climbed from her bath. Having dried herself off she sat on the edge of the bathtub and began to sensually roll on her sheer tan coloured stockings. She was keenly anticipating her 2pm appointment as across the hallway Judith cried out, "Oh my God!" Judith's libido, once released, was insatiable and again Lawrence was worked into a state of extreme arousal by his lover's caresses and manipulations. This time he rolled her on to her front and forcibly penetrated the young wife from behind. Judith writhed in frenzied delight and buried her face in the pillow as Lawrence caught sight of himself in the wardrobe mirror; his face a contorted grimace of aggression and desire, of violence and simultaneous love. He was glad that she could not see that look, so animal and beast like in its urgency. The young couple

collapsed in each other's arms and held on tightly not wanting this time to pass. A few minutes elapsed in post coital oblivion before Judith broke the silence.

- "We have to get up now my love."
- "Yes, of course," replied Lawrence suddenly thinking of his date with the lusty widow.

He wanted to stay with Judith in his arms and drink in her presence but knew such luxuries would have to wait. At this stage he couldn't endanger their future bliss through carelessness or childish

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sentimentality. Reluctantly he accepted that he had to move and get out of there without further delay. He climbed back into his trousers which had been hastily discarded in the heat of disrobement. Judith also sprang into action and stripped the once pristine white sheets. The bedding was now sullied and soaked by the act of love. Bundling the linen into a laundry bag she opened the bedroom window and sprayed the room with air freshener; a wise precautionary measure as the bedchamber reeked of sex and bodily fluids. Neville was very sensitive to smells and noticed even the slightest change to the flat's lay out. Everything had to be put back in exactly the right place. Admittedly Neville didn't venture into the spare bedroom very often but it would be just typical of him to break that habit out of some instinctive sense of unease and start asking awkward

questions. Judith pictured an evil child catcher sniffing out victims in a dark fairy tale when she thought of her husband. Neville was as cunning and perceptive as a predatory weasel. How strange to compare him to a lithe killer, a withered being like him with little power over his movements forever confined to a metal chair. Then her lover spoke.

- "I love you, Judith."
- "I love you too," replied Judith. "But now you must go. Follow me quietly and I will let you out of the back door."

Soon Lawrence had clambered through the hedge and was back on the pavement around the corner from the entrance to *The Grange*. As he gathered his thoughts and composure a young child cycled past. The boy of ten or so years looked at Lawrence accusingly as if he

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knew what the large man emerging from the hedgerows had just been doing, but how could that be? Get a grip, man, snapped Lawrence to himself as he walked the short distance to the car park. Entering the grounds of *The Grange* he paused to straighten his tie and comb his hair outside *flat 2*. Judith was only yards away in a freshly run hot bath, her eyes closed as she rinsed her brow, rerunning what had just happened in her mind. This magnificent specimen of womanhood lay with legs outstretched, her large spherical breasts

protruding slightly through the surface of the milky soapy water. Judith's tired face wore an expression of physical and emotional fulfilment.

At the same time as Judith soaked in scented water her mother-in-law stood before a large mirror in the master bedroom next door. Not bad, she thought, for an old woman. I can still stir the blood of a healthy younger man. The matching pink frilled underwear and flesh coloured stockings were topped off by a necklace set of pearls which Daniel had bought as a twenty fifth anniversary present. Checking her make up for the final time she buttoned up her stylish one piece cotton dress. Mrs Glynn turned in the mirror to check that the seams of her stockings were straight. The widow was taking an inordinate amount of time over arranging her appearance. She wanted to create a certain effect for what would come afterwards after the initial boring niceties. Today she wanted Lawrence to be in charge. She wanted him to forcibly take her while she pretended to put up a fight. But it would be no run of the mill domination fantasy. She wanted Lawrence to tear all her clothes off with his teeth. Mrs Glynn would

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start by violently ripping off her dress buttons so that he got the idea of what was required. The rest would be up to him and the widow was confident that Lawrence

would be up to the challenge based on his promising debut.

As Lawrence entered via the sliding windows Mrs Glynn was sat facing him in her favourite armchair. She pretended to ignore him as she continued to read a magazine. The young man closed the window and sat down in the other chair. Still, Mrs Glynn said nothing as she licked the ends of her fingers in order to turn the pages of the glossy journal affecting an air of bored indifference. Lawrence studied the widow with her horn rimmed reading spectacles and conservative appearance. The pearls are a nice touch, he thought. She looked like a stiffly formal and demure librarian or school governess; the *clichéd* repressed spinster who uncharacteristically lets down her hair and transforms into a man-eating siren. He was fascinated by her act and, despite his fatigue, wondered where this game was leading. Suddenly she put the magazine down on the coffee table and looked at Lawrence as if she had just noticed his presence in the room for the first time. Without speaking and with the hint of a taunting smile she slowly raised the hem of her dress up over her upper thighs and pretty pink panties. Then as Lawrence approached she started to rip off her dress buttons partially exposing the lacy fabric of her white cotton bra...

A routine developed. Lawrence would sneak into *The Grange* via the hedgerows every Wednesday just past midday. Checking that he was

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unobserved he would get down on all fours and squeeze through the gap which was a bit of a struggle due to his expanding waist line. The easy life was making him fat and short of breath if he did anything more strenuous than a slow walk of about a mile. He was overeating and drinking too much; his only exertion being the sexual act which he could still manage surprisingly well. In fact his indolence seemed to enhance his performance thus legitimising his slothful lifestyle.

Lawrence was thankful that he never saw the haunting little boy again. The child had given him the creeps, so it was a relief that the troubling cherub hadn't reappeared by the hedgerows. Free of any sense of guilt or imminent risk of exposure his relationship with Judith developed into a tempestuous love affair. She was the woman he wanted to share his life with. It was as if they had always been together so natural was their bond. Yet his depraved sexual relations with Mrs Glynn remained secret behind the lace curtains of *flat 1* and continued in the afternoons when he ostensibly visited the widow for tea and cakes. There was no limit to her kinky games and role play scenarios themed on various fetishes and deviant sexual practices some of which

involved the cakes smeared over various body parts. Lawrence wanted to stop sleeping with the widow but didn't know how to break off the relationship. There was also the risk of their sessions being discovered as the widow became increasingly complacent. Once Mrs Glynn had called him by his first name in front of the Thursday night crowd which had not gone unnoticed but which she had casually brushed off. Lawrence is virtually part of the family now, she had explained.

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Eventually a sexually exhausted Lawrence persuaded Mrs Glynn to change the time and venue of their weekly tryst, which came as a huge relief to the over taxed *Don Juan*. He had outlined the benefits of having extra time together in the more discrete surroundings of his apartment, but initially she had rejected the idea. He suspected that the widow was turned on by the danger and risk of exposure that sex in *The Grange* entailed. On one occasion Neville had returned early from the hospital and Lawrence had been forced to hide in a cupboard for two hours. Eventually Mrs Glynn had given him the all-clear and quickly shooed him from the premises but that had been a near escape and a sobering lesson. Lawrence didn't fancy being placed in such a compromising position again particularly as his time in the dark airless closet had induced a mild attack of claustrophobia. It was with some relief that they came to a mutually acceptable solution. In the end after

protracted negotiations Mrs Glynn agreed to visit Lawrence at his apartment on Tuesday morning at ten.

The weather was autumnal and Mrs Glynn hadn't looked out of place in head scarf and raincoat as she walked the short distance to Lawrence's flat the following Tuesday. Taking the *Jag* would have attracted unwanted attention as lots of people in the locale knew the owner of the distinctive classic motor car. Clicking along on heels under an umbrella, as a fine misty rain saturated the day, the widow was unrecognizable behind her upturned collar and sunglasses, her striking platinum hair hidden in silk. She was visiting her *GP* in *Prestwich Village* if by chance she was identified en route. People don't tend to press a woman for details when she explains that she is

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visiting her doctor so her cover story was solid enough. In any event there were not many people out on such a miserable rain swept day and her progress was uninterrupted. Mrs Glynn was confident that her preparations would guarantee her anonymity as she neared her destination.

Lawrence looked at his watch and noted the time. She would be here soon unless something unforeseen had cropped up. He was certain that the widow would phone to let him know if anything unexpected had scuppered their planned date. There was always the possibility

that Neville might have had one of his breathing attacks but notwithstanding that unlikely event everything seemed set for a morning of debauchery. He hoped he wasn't tempting fate by being overly confident. On reflection she might have changed her mind about the visit deeming it too risky. As he peered out of the window he was oddly relieved to see a statuesque woman striding up the drive way with familiar purpose. Lawrence was impressed by the disguise which once more demonstrated the widow's resourcefulness and guile. He opened the door and greeted the widow who shook the rain from her umbrella and stamped her high heels like a grenadier standing to attention. Lawrence tried to imagine what she had lined up for them on today's sexual itinerary. If recent form was anything to go by he was looking at a physically exhausting experience bordering on the surreal; the widow certainly knew how to push the envelope of the imagination. In fact this was the main reason that he couldn't break free of this manic minx with the need to satisfy his own morbid curiosity trumping all other considerations.

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There seemed to be no limit to Mrs Glynn's repertoire. Lawrence had to concede the point with bemused appreciation and increasing incredulity. The lexicon of love had been thumbed from cover to cover and yet she still managed to devise ingeniously kinky permutations of the sexual act. What previously had

appeared a fairly straightforward physical union between two consenting adults had developed into a multi-dimensional menu with an infinite number of perverse variables. Mrs Glynn laughed at the banality of *The Kama Sutra* and its uninspired teachings. It is about as erotic as a wet weekend in Cleethorpes, she had joked. Years of yoga exercises had kept the freakish widow supple. Though she could have worked in an Indian circus she lamented the physical constraints of the human body.

- "Please come in, Rachel, said Lawrence, holding out his hand to take the now furled parasol.

As Mrs Glynn was stepping into the flat Brian and Roger emerged from next door.

- "Good morning, Lawrence," said Brian.
- "Good morning Brian and Roger," replied Lawrence awkwardly. He was keen to get Mrs Glynn indoors quickly without any unforeseen complications.
- "Who's your friend?" asked Roger.
- "Yes, aren't you going to introduce us?" added Brian, sensing Lawrence's almost comical unease.

- "This is Vanessa. Vanessa, this is Brian and Roger, my neighbours," replied Lawrence inwardly happy with his inspired Vanessa deceit.
- "You look fabulous, Vanessa, with that *femme fatale* look. Very *Greta Garbo*," said Brian.
- "Absolutely! The head scarf and glasses lend you a certain mystique. You look divine, darling," added Roger.

Mrs Glynn tried her best to smile despite being mortified by the intimacy of this exchange. She hastily made her way into the flat without looking back or uttering a word.

- "Vanessa is very shy," explained Lawrence.
- "Say no more, Lawrence," replied Brian. "Mum's the word."

As Lawrence gently closed the door on the two smiling homosexuals, Brian raised his finger to the side of his nose and gently tapped.

- "Mum's the word old boy, Mum's the word."

Lawrence experienced a horrible wave of nausea in his gut caused by Brian's use of the *M* word. Quickly he pulled himself together and dismissed the remote possibility that Brian knew about Mrs Glynn and her son Neville. Brian had just used a figure of speech with no hidden meaning but then why had he repeated himself almost as if making a point? There was nothing to be

gained by worrying about matters beyond his control, reasoned Lawrence. Dismissing his misgivings he entered the sitting room and found Mrs Glynn, still buttoned up in her disguise, sat demurely upright on the sofa.

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- "Who was that?" she asked.
- "Just my neighbours," replied Lawrence.
- "I felt their eyes burning into me. Why did they look at me as if I was a criminal?" asked Mrs Glynn.
- "You are being paranoid. They are harmless nosy people, without any malice," said Lawrence. "Our secret is safe."
- "I hope so, Lawrence. I have a lot to lose," said Mrs Glynn.
- "I know that, Rachel," replied Lawrence. "They were right on one thing though. You do look sensational in that get up."

Rachel smiled and began to slowly unbuckle the belt of her figure hugging raincoat.

Tuesday mornings were thus spent with Mrs Glynn; the snatched two hours on Wednesday reserved for Judith. Lawrence found this arrangement unsatisfactory. He had to find a way of spending more time with the young wife though the existing routine did have one advantage. At least Rachel didn't expect arduous sex

on Wednesday afternoons anymore, though she had suggested as much a couple of times. His frenzied lovemaking with Judith left him completely drained and sated and he felt relief that tea and cakes were now the only items on the agenda at *flat 1*.

This complex web of deceit, of feverish entanglements behind closed doors, continued unabated for months, with Lawrence seeking to devote his love to one woman but lacking the energy and resolve to translate his true feelings into action. All this time neither woman had the faintest inkling that Lawrence was leading a double life.

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As Lawrence continued to bed Rachel and Judith he showed a blatant disregard for Neville. His attitude was one characterised by cruel indifference and contempt. Lawrence's callousness towards his former friend intensified with each passing week. Judith was now all consuming like a psychotropic drug; acting on his nervous system and destroying his sense of free will and adherence to conventional morality. He needed his fix, whatever the cost. Yet as the intensity of his addiction grew he became less satisfied with once-a-week relief. He had to find a solution, to somehow get Neville out of the way or entice Judith out of the house. Two hours on Wednesdays wasn't enough. As he crept through the gap in the hedge for the umpteenth time he resolved to speak with Judith. She led him by the

hand through the corridors and he distractedly followed the young woman's buttocks with his eyes as they shimmied tantalisingly under the sheer fabric of her house coat. Lawrence was hopelessly bewitched by Judith's raw animal like sexuality and all rationality was lost. Sharp uncontrollable pangs of desire pulsed through his body like waves of electricity as she closed the door to *flat 2*.

Judith is beautiful, thought Lawrence. Judith is beautiful. He was constantly surprised at just how beautiful Judith was. The passionate smiles they exchanged, her lithe body and total abandonment in the act of love, the smell of her sex, were all now so familiar, and yet at such odds with his initial impression of this young woman. He had awakened something in her which had lain dormant for years. Lawrence had been the catalyst that had released her primal nature, her instinctive carnality and passion. Judith was a lustful creature

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with the innate prowess of a courtesan. Her once beautiful mother, locked away in the local asylum, had been overwhelmed by the same libidinous urges. Out of control she had been expediently diagnosed with *nymphomania*. Barbara had brought shame on Judith's father and been the talk of North Manchester, and for those who remembered her, would forever be that shameless *Jezebel*. All of this had been kept secret from

Judith who shared her mother's blood and beguiling charms. She was a seductive and irresistible force, misunderstood by all around her save for Lawrence, who knew and loved her real nature.

Whenever Lawrence left Judith he felt like a drunken man, his legs devoid of strength, his mind a dizzy fog of shifting sensations and unarticulated thoughts. Sometimes it was a supreme physical struggle to contort his large body through the gap in the hedgerows and emerge on the other side, to make the transition from heaven-like fantasy to sobering reality and his appointment with Mrs Glynn. Keeping up the Wednesday afternoon charade was made all the more difficult by his wandering mind. At all hours of the day he pictured Judith in the throes of ecstasy in various poses, often spasmodic as if she were in an epileptic fit. Like a traumatised soldier he experienced these vivid involuntary recollections suddenly and without warning. Tuesday mornings became a chore and only bearable if, during the sexual act, he could summon up Judith's face in place of Rachel's lascivious visage. Similarly Wednesday's tea and cakes session became an ordeal to be overcome and endured.

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Repeatedly Mrs Glynn pestered him for sex and tried to tempt him a bizarre series of ways including dressing up in various outfits. One week the widow was a nurse,

the next a policewoman, all in a desperate attempt to break down Lawrence's resistance on Wednesday afternoons.

- "It's too risky here," he beseeched as Mrs Glynn approached from the bedroom wearing a latex one piece cat suit.
- "No one will disturb us. Neville is at the hospital and Judith is out shopping," she replied thrusting her rubber coated breasts in his face.
- "No. You said that once, and I had to hide in the cupboard for two hours or have you forgotten about that?" pleaded Lawrence.
- "I know but that was just once. It's worth the risk," implored Mrs Glynn.
- "I can't God damn it. Think of Neville and Judith and what it would do to them if they found out about us," gushed Lawrence in a torrent of emotional mendacity.
- "I know. I know what you are saying. I too feel guilty sometimes but what harm are we doing? I find you incredibly attractive and I need you," replied Mrs Glynn.
- "I need you too but not here," replied Lawrence happy now that he seemed to be winning the argument.

All this time as Lawrence was speaking he couldn't prevent the recurring image of Judith coming into focus in his mind's eye. She

was always lying invitingly on virgin white cotton sheets with arms outstretched drawing him urgently forwards to that *Venus* like body; that peerless temple of the flesh with its perfect curves and soft undulations. He even thought of her in this way on *Bridge Night* and found it difficult to follow the thread of Horowitz's orations or make intelligent interjections in the conversation. When he did say something it was more often than not totally irrelevant or constituted the most outrageous *faux pas*. On one occasion he had asked for *two tits* with his coffee instead of two sugars. Horowitz still joked about that particular Freudian slip, even incorporating into his repertoire when playing cards. The two of any suit was now *the two of tits*.

Lawrence knew enough about *Bridge* to recognize that Horowitz's behaviour at the table was crass and in breach of etiquette. It was the little things he did and said that caused the other players to squirm in their seats. The ignorant ex-policeman always picked up his hand before the dealer finished distributing the cards which was considered bad form, and when someone announced a double bid he would routinely shout, *mine's a whiskey!*, laughing at his own pun. Frank Horowitz was a poor *Bridge* player who dreamed of *Grand Slams* but never came anywhere near his achieving his aims. He often bid too high losing ignominiously at the altar of his grandiose ambition,

announcing seven no trumps when a pass would have been more appropriate. Mrs Burger had developed a reverse psychological approach that was predicated on the principle that Frank Horowitz would necessarily play the wrong card after making the wrong bid

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and settling for an unrealistic contract. The man was like an overgrown child who could barely contain his excitement when dealt the *Ace of Spades*. Even Lawrence with his *Bridge* playing inexperience had picked up on that give away behaviour. Perversely Horowitz's inept play was causing Lawrence to take more interest in the weekly game but the cards were still only a distraction from his real obsession.

It was Judith who first mentioned that Neville took a nap in the afternoons. This was one of the reasons why the invalid got so irritable on Wednesday afternoons. The trip to the hospital interfered with his usual relaxing routine. Could I slip into flat 2 while Neville had his afternoon siestas? Was the invalid a sound sleeper? , considered Lawrence. He had raised the matter with Judith as they lay side by side in a state of post-coital exhaustion.

- "I have some strong sleeping tablets that might knock him out for a few hours," whispered Lawrence.

Judith met his gaze with doubt in her eyes.

- "I know what you are thinking. It is risky but maybe we could have a trial run," suggested Lawrence. "You could put some in his lunch time cup of tea and see if they knock him out for the rest of the afternoon."

Judith nodded tentatively but still looked worried by the idea.

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- "How many tablets are we talking about? It might kill him, what with his breathing problems," said Judith.

So much the better, thought Lawrence, before replying.

- "I've tried these tablets myself. I had insomnia before I came back to Manchester. Two crushed up in a cup of tea would knock him out for two or three hours. They take about twenty minutes or so to kick in after ingestion."
- "I suppose we could try it," said Judith. "It would mean we could be together more often."
- "Good. I'll crush two tablets up tonight and give you them in a small sachet tomorrow evening. With all the other guests here it should be easy to hand it over unnoticed," said Lawrence.

Any uneasiness felt by the couple regarding the new plan was overwhelmed by their desires. If Neville could be rendered unconscious every afternoon then what ecstasies they could share in the spare room while the hapless cuckold snored his head only yards away.

It was Thursday evening and all the guests had arrived with Horowitz taking the opportunity to pontificate in his usual boring fashion.

- “Manchester city centre is an absolute disgrace these days. Has anyone been into town recently?” asked the corpulent ex-detective.

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- “Yes, I agree with you,” replied Mrs Burger throwing down a five of diamonds.
- “In what way, Frank?” asked Mrs Glynn.
- “The city is full of beggars with their hands held out for small change,” replied Horowitz.
- “Really? Is it that bad?” asked Mrs Glynn.
- “Yes it is I’m afraid. *Market Street* is awash with the low lives and as for that architectural monstrosity that used to be *Piccadilly Gardens*, don’t get me started. If I was still in the force I would run the lot of them out of town,” announced Horowitz.

- "Maybe they are genuinely desperate," said Judith, much to everyone's surprise. It was rare that Judith said anything at all.
- "I doubt that very much," replied Horowitz. "They are all on generous state benefits and beg for extra booze and drug money."
- "The ones that I have seen look genuine enough," said Judith.
- "That's part of their act," said Neville. "A bunch of con artists the lot of them. Frank is right. They should be rounded up and dumped on the outskirts of Manchester - *Wythenshawe* or somewhere similar."
- "I know you mean well, dear, but Frank is right about all the undesirables in Manchester. We had the same problem in *Salford Precinct* when I was Mayor," added Mrs Burger.

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- "But if they are all doing as well as you claim how is that they are sleeping in tents outside the *Central Library*?" asked Judith.
- "Political activists the lot of them. They are camping out in order to try and embarrass the government. That's what the tent village is all about," replied an angry Horowitz.
- "Well, I always give them a couple of pounds when they ask for money," said Judith.

- “You must stop doing that, Judith,” interjected Neville. “Money doesn’t grow on trees.”

Lawrence had been listening to the conversation. He had to agree with Horowitz and Neville but was touched by Judith’s humanity and kind heart. As she went to make fresh tea he followed her into the kitchen and slipped her the sachet of crushed sleeping pills; an extra third capsule ground into the mix.

- “Tomorrow at midday. I will ring shortly after to see if he is out for the count,” he whispered in Judith’s ear.

Oliver was now taking sleeping tablets and that was where he got the idea of drugging Neville in the story. He knew from personal experience that the medication knocked him out until the following morning. But sleeping late and feeling drowsy the next day were not ideal side effects for a would-be novelist. Oliver was about half way through but had to keep his momentum going now more than ever.

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He knew that if he stopped all would be lost and the book would never get finished. Luckily Mrs Glynn had been sighted a couple of times climbing into the *Mark 2 Jaguar*. She had looked sensational in skirt and heels looking every inch an assured woman in her prime; a

Corporate CEO, Fleet Street Editor or Government Minister. The sexy widow's appearances had inspired Oliver to write with the concomitant stimulation of his creative juices.

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Chapter 9 – *Gross Moral Turpitude*

The next day went smoothly as planned. It was 12-30pm when Judith led Lawrence into the main bedroom

and showed him a comatose Neville spread eagled on the marital bed. As Lawrence nuzzled his chin into Judith's neck he massaged her fulsome breasts through the fabric of her blouse. He felt her nipples harden and extend in response to his touch. Slowly and tauntingly he started to lift the hem of Judith's skirt in front of the prostrate Neville.

- "Not here," she said. "In the spare room. You go and get undressed. I need to switch on the *TV* in the lounge."
- "Not for Neville's benefit, I take it," said Lawrence.
- "No, it's in case the neighbours hear us."
- "You think of everything."

The sex was particularly energetic and frenzied that afternoon as Neville lay oblivious next door; more violent desire than a gentle melting of two bodies. There was aggression in Lawrence's thrusting pelvic movements as he savoured this ultimate expression of his power and his efforts to bend Judith to his will. The subjugation was total as he took hold of Judith's hair and plunged deeper and ever more savagely between her firm muscular legs, their bodies entwined like ferocious animals fighting. Her gasps became louder as the sounds of love mingled with the drone of the *TV* and Neville's whistling snores, producing a weird sonorous effect that vaguely resembled an approaching steam

locomotive. And then it went quiet like the eerie silence one experiences after a loud explosion. Only the

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background conversation of the TV was audible. Judith looked up at the ceiling as Lawrence rolled off her glistening body.

- "How long do we have?" she asked.

Lawrence picked up his watch from the bedside table just as Neville's snoring reassuringly resumed.

- "At least another hour," he replied. "He seems happy enough."
- "Let's not push our luck. You should go in a few minutes," said Judith.
- "Perhaps you are right. Another twenty minutes or so will be fine though," replied Lawrence.
- "If only you knew how I have suffered all these years with that monster next door," said Judith.
- "I know, my love. I know," said Lawrence.
- "You are the first man that I have slept with in the proper sense," she said.

Lawrence nodded and stroked Judith's lustrous hair.

- "Growing up with that weakling was torture. I was his unpaid nurse," she continued. "I never knew my mother and a distant cold father

married me off to Neville and this prison. What was I supposed to do?"

- "What you are doing is perfectly natural. We are meant to be together," soothed Lawrence.

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- "Every day is the same with me making the witch her bloody *TCP*," said Judith.
- "*TCP*?" asked Lawrence.
- "She's got a thing about *tomatoes, cucumbers and peppers, TCP!*" exclaimed Judith.

Lawrence laughed.

- "And as for *Bridge Night* on Thursdays," continued Judith now warming to her theme. "Is there a smugger, more self-satisfied group of people anywhere to match them?"
- "I know what you mean," said Lawrence, kissing Judith's large left nipple with its brown circular shaped areola.
- "My wedding night was a sham. He fell asleep. And that was after I spent hours getting ready. I got dressed up in stockings and corset like a trussed chicken; a succulent morsel prepared for his delectation, and for what? The plain fact is that our marriage was never consummated. What a joke!"

- “It’s like we are the married couple,” said Lawrence momentarily lifting his face away from Judith’s bosom before resuming his kneading and kissing.

Lawrence felt his engorged penis begin to stiffen as he salivated like *Pavlov’s* dog over Judith’s naked form.

- “We still have time,” he said as he parted Judith’s thighs.

It was Judith who grabbed Lawrence’s rigid penis with both hands and guided it in again, feeling both ecstasy and pain.

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- “If only he was dead,” moaned the young woman in a hushed whisper as she gripped him.

The outside world did not exist for the lovers as they writhed in the throes of an adulterous whirl yet they were not alone. As Lawrence pounded the young wife an attentive Neville watched the deceivers through a gap in the bedroom door. His face was a study in earnest concentration as the *BBC* announced the *three o’ clock news* headlines on the lounge *TV*. The couple climaxed as *Donald Trump’s* election victory was confirmed by the announcer. Neville struggled to contain his own excitement at the breaking news from America. *Obama* had been a disaster with his liberal posturing and dilly-dallying in the *Middle East*. The

world needed a strong man at the helm and Trump was more pro-Israeli, which was an added bonus as far as Neville was concerned. Geopolitics was one thing but he needed time to consider developments closer to home. Neville quietly wheeled himself back into the master bedroom and resumed his sleeping pose. There was a lot to digest politically and personally.

Neville took the simultaneous discovery of his wife's adultery and the defeat of *Hillary Clinton* as a sign. *Donald Trump* was his hero and he would try to ape the great man's style. Like the Manhattan property developer he would deal with Judith and Lawrence in a dispassionate business like fashion. This was no time for expressions of emotion or feeble displays of sentimentality. *Trump* changed his mind a lot but when he acted he did so decisively and was not afraid to pull the trigger. There was a new sheriff in town and arrangements at *The*

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Grange were about to change. Fatefully for Neville he had not overheard his wife's stated death wish.

Each new meeting between the couple became more passionate; adultery acting as an aphrodisiac. They were turned on by the deceptive nature of their afternoon sex sessions unaware that they were being watched. Every day Neville pretended to swallow the brew secretly laced with knock-out drops. He had

perfected a way of pouring the drink into a plant pot when Judith's attention was diverted. Then feigning deep sleep in the master bedroom he listened for Lawrence's arrival and timed the couple undressing next door. He gave them a few minutes before the sound of the banging headboard and creaking springs settled into their manic rhythm, distinctly audible above the sound of the radio and more often than not an afternoon episode of *The Archers*. Wheeling himself into position he would watch the besotted couple make passionate love, more intrigued than aroused. What a strange business sex was, he thought. So animalistic and barbaric!

Neville had no feelings of sexual jealousy. Having drawn up a list of positives and negatives associated with Judith's adultery his only real concern was the possible threat to his comfortable life. Lawrence might conceivably take Judith, his unpaid nurse, away and frankly it was a bloody cheek abusing his hospitality and friendship in such a flagrant way. It was a blow to his ego that they had both treated him like such an idiot but Neville remained confident that the couple would not elope. He figured that Lawrence had some money but

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probably not enough to care for Judith and set up home. Certainly Judith had no money of her own relying solely

on the largesse of his mother for her pocket money. Neville convinced himself that the lovers were going nowhere, at least for the foreseeable future. If it was all just a fling then he could live with that for now. In the meantime he would monitor developments before deciding exactly what to do.

Judith's recent behaviour now started to make sense to Neville. So that was why she was always complaining of headaches. It was all a ruse to keep his mother out of the picture and as for the sleeping tablets! He had managed to work that one out quickly enough. His usual *siestas* didn't give him a hangover like the drug induced sleeps. The calculating bitch, he thought angrily, and it had turned out that his so called childhood friend Lawrence was even worse. Neville was enraged by the treachery of this bastard who had walked into his comfortable life, betraying his trust and abusing his hospitality. Neville wanted revenge but knew that he was no match for Lawrence physically. He was going to have to give the matter some thought and knew that revenge was best served cold. Neville made an oath that he would take his time and pay back his tormentors. As he began to savour the delicious prospect of retaliation Neville was snapped out of his reverie by his wife's screams.

- "Harder, harder!" implored the bucking adulteress almost comically reckless and uninhibited in her complete abandon.

What would mother make of all this? , thought Neville as he reversed away and awkwardly climbed back on to his own bed. As Neville thought of meeting out future justice and getting his own back Lawrence whispered in his lover's ear.

- "You are my tigress, my beautiful tigress."

Then as if on cue the door bell to *flat 2* buzzed. Mrs Glynn had a spare key to *flat 2* but always rang first as a matter of courtesy. She still harboured the idea that Judith might one day have children by Neville and took care to give the couple their space, at least during the afternoons. The widow had seen through Judith's headache excuses! It was natural for a young woman to want to spend time with her husband and Neville took after Daniel with his understated good looks. You couldn't blame the girl. But today was different and she needed to speak with her daughter-in-law. Mrs Glynn wanted Judith to go shopping again specifically on Wednesday afternoons so that she could have Lawrence's undivided attention. Tuesday mornings were fine but she needed more. Lawrence certainly knew how to press her buttons and she wanted to recreate that occasion when they had made wild fervent love that first memorable afternoon in *flat 1*.

Neville yawned loudly and made as much noise as possible rising from his fake slumber as the sound of frantic activity could be heard in the spare room. Neville called out his wife's name.

- "Judith, where are you?"

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- "In here darling. I'm in bed," answered a flustered Judith.
- "Can you answer the door? I think that it's mother."
- "Yes dear. I'm getting dressed," replied Judith.

Without ceremony Neville barged into the spare room door using the foot rests of his wheelchair as an impromptu battering ram. His wife was hurriedly buttoning up her blouse as Lawrence lay hidden beneath the bed. Neville, a natural sadist, thought that he would have some fun at his wife's expense and play along with the subterfuge.

- "Did I disturb you, darling?"

The door bell buzzed again, this time more insistently.

- "No darling. I had a headache so I went to bed," she replied.
- "I see that you got undressed for the occasion," noted Neville.

- "Well, I felt very warm. A fever maybe? So I got undressed under the covers."

Lawrence was listening to the conversation from his hidden position. Under the covers he could see Neville's boringly sensible shoes on the wheelchair foot plates. Lawrence wanted to reveal his presence in the room and if the widow hadn't turned up he would have had it out with him there and then.

- "Yes, you are sweating profusely dear. A fever you say?" said Neville. "I better get the door. Mother will be wondering what's going on."

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Neville reversed out of the room giving time for Judith to finish dressing. Quickly she got down on her hands and knees and whispered under the bed.

- "Stay there my love and don't move or make a sound."

No sooner had she stood back up than the Mrs Glynn and son appeared at the threshold of the room.

- "I hope I didn't disturb you dear," apologized Mrs Glynn.
- "Judith was asleep, mother. She has a fever," explained Neville.

Judith smiled weakly and nodded in agreement

- "You certainly look flushed dear. Would you like me to ring for a doctor?" asked the widow.
- "No. I think I will be alright, thank you."
- "Well, let me know if you take a turn for the worse," said Mrs Glynn. "I will bring you round some chicken soup."

Lawrence studied the widow's ankles from under the bed. He had to admit that Mrs Glynn had the most beautiful finely turned ankles. Smiling to himself he noted that it wasn't the first time that he had studied her legs at such close quarters.

- "I'm actually here for a chat," continued Mrs Glynn. "I just wanted you to know that if you want to go out shopping on Wednesday afternoons when Neville is at the hospital then

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- you can take my store cards and spend a shopping day in Manchester."
- "That's very generous of you, Rachel," replied Judith.
- "It's the least that I can do. You are a marvellous daughter-in-law and you deserve a treat now and again."
- "I think I will do just that," replied Judith eager to conclude the conversation and shift the company into the lounge. "Let me make some tea and I can pick your brains on the latest fashions."

As the door to the spare room closed Lawrence breathed a sigh of relief. He thanked God that Neville and Rachel didn't understand love and recognize the signs in Judith. They were both too wrapped up in their own worlds and selfish pleasures to notice what is going on under their noses, concluded a relieved Lawrence.

As Judith made the tea she wondered how Lawrence was going to escape the flat unnoticed. Fortunately Neville came to her aid when he suggested they switch off *Radio 4* and turn on the *TV* for the afternoon news update. Only Judith saw Lawrence's large form move quickly across the hallway and silently out of the door. Thank you, Bridie, thought Judith, for the absence of indoor CCTV.

Lawrence climbing through the gap in the hedge realized in a moment of absolute clarity that the current state of affairs could not go on. He knew that he loved Judith, if love means wanting to be with another person the whole time to the exclusion of all others. He was obsessed with this woman who he found physically irresistible and

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inextricably connected to on an emotional level. He wanted to possess her totally and her to be his wife and the mother of his children. He wanted to stop skulking around and declare his devotion publicly. He had had enough of climbing through hedgerows and hiding in

cupboards and under beds like a dupe in a French farce. Judith's stated wish kept coming back to him and he knew it made sense. Lawrence planned the hypothetical death of Neville and its potential consequences. With the invalid out of the way everything would fall into place. After a year he could quickly and secretly marry Judith and the widow would have to accept this *fait accompli*. Moreover, when Rachel died Judith would be left everything; the flats, the money, the properties. Lawrence had his own money but the pot was dwindling. Even his dreamed of writing career was on hold as he hadn't written anything for the best part of a year, and getting a humdrum job to pay the bills was simply beneath him and out of the question. Lawrence recited the justifications for murder like mantras: Neville was not a real man and he didn't deserve Judith, and what he was doing was only natural. These nagging voices refused to go away and he was haunted by their persistence day and night.

As winter came and went, and the first daffodils sprouted in the emerging sunlight, life at *The Grange* continued in its predictable rhythm. Residents went about their business using the car park as a staging post for trips to Manchester, while a team of underpaid landscapers, cleaners and handymen maintained the building's

pristine appearance. However, the widow's Tuesday morning sessions had been cancelled at Lawrence's insistence. He claimed that she had been recognized by Brian and Roger as the driver of the silver *Jag Mark 2*. In truth no such connection had been made by his neighbours but he was relying on her fear of public ignominy should their affair become common knowledge. It was an expedient reason for calling off her weekly visits which were becoming increasingly bizarre with Mrs Glynn turning up in a variety of disguises. The widow had an extensive collection of different coloured wigs and headwear allied to an innate acting ability. On one occasion she had arrived as a stooping grey haired geriatric, kitted out in a woolly hat and granny coat, pulling a tartan shopping trolley for added authenticity. Lawrence had had to use all of his imaginative powers to overcome and eventually delete that debilitating visual image. Lawrence wondered what else she had up her sleeve; maybe a pious nun, a female *Rabbi*, or a shrouded *Islamist*. Such was his curiosity Lawrence almost backtracked on his cancellation of the Tuesday meetings. Nevertheless his mind was finally made up when Mrs Glynn preposterously arrived in one of Neville's old wheelchairs playing the part of a plucky paraplegic.

As a sop to the widow he reluctantly started to sleep with her again on *Wednesday tea & cakes* afternoons; a

tiresome schedule after an exhausting two hours with Judith. The demanding Mrs Glynn wouldn't take no for an answer and the only way Lawrence could do the deed was if she wore one of her dark wigs. Having discovered the efficacy of this disguise Lawrence always insisted on the widow's

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Compliance - with auburn hair she resembled Judith, this visual trick helping him to get aroused and enabling him to satisfy the depraved matriarch. But Lawrence knew that this was just a stop gap measure and in accordance with the law of diminishing returns would eventually fail to yield its desired results. Already it was requiring greater and greater imaginative effort to summon up the image of Judith's face and body as he mounted the indefatigable older woman.

Oliver didn't know what Lawrence was moaning about. It would have given him infinite pleasure to ride the tireless widow. But this wasn't pure autobiography. Oliver wasn't the same person as Lawrence; well not completely. *Judith Glynn* was a work of fiction inspired by real events as they said in the pre-credits to American movies. Yet Oliver empathised with the demands being made on Lawrence's imagination in his attempts to service the widow. He too was finding it difficult to summon up that detailed image of Mrs Glynn

standing in her window wearing only black underwear. In its place he would draw pictures in his mind's eye that he was sure bore little or no resemblance to the widow in reality. But did that necessarily matter? Wasn't sexual fantasy and arousal all in the mind anyway? Sometimes Mrs Glynn would be endowed with a standard sized bust with his focus zooming in on her full thighs accentuated by the stocking tops and suspenders. But how big were her thighs? Normally she wore skirts and dresses so it was difficult to be sure on the basis of a fleeting glance lasting less than a second through an opaque net

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curtain. In other imaginary longings her breasts would be exaggerated to porn star dimensions and totally dominate the frame. Naked, clad in lingerie, or fully covered by clothing, the boobs would be the objects of desire and the sole preoccupation. But how big were Mrs Glynn's mammary glands really? Again it was difficult to tell though Oliver was generally more certain of his statistics when it came to boobs rather than thighs. He gauged that Mrs Glynn was a good *E-cup* possibly more, and at least *38 inches* round the chest and back. He was pretty sure that her breasts were held in and flattened to a large extent by an expensively fitted bra. What a thrill it would be to see her remove the constricting brassiere and witness those fulsome breasts drop and quiver, coming to rest at their natural

level just above the navel. Without doubt her areolas would be large and brown complementing the widow's prominent nipples. The nipples he had seen in outline straining against the fabric of blouse and dress. There was absolutely no doubt about the widow's nipples. Oliver would give everything he had to see Mrs Glynn undress and reveal herself if only for one never to be forgotten time. He would insist that she pose for both monochrome and colour photographs; an extended shoot session, and maybe a video of Mrs Glynn moving around with nothing too staged. He could film her doing the housework or better still getting undressed apparently unaware of the camera.

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Chapter 10 - *The Baby*

Lawrence grew physically and mentally exhausted with Wednesdays and his daily afternoon sessions. A hard pressed plate spinner he frantically switched to and fro between Mrs Glynn and Judith. Sometimes he was amazed by his own resilience and ability to keep the two women happy. With a lifestyle that would be the envy of many men Lawrence was grateful for his good fortune. Nevertheless he experienced pangs of anxiety. Increasingly he felt uneasy and had convinced himself

that a tumultuous show- down was imminent; a confrontation that would end his *Pasha-like* existence. In such an eventuality his senses and appetites would no longer be gratified by two lustful compliant females. Manchester would be a much colder city without the warm voluptuous embraces he currently enjoyed. Lawrence suspected that Neville knew about his affair with his wife. The previous Thursday evening Neville had aimed a couple of arch comments in his direction. Nothing too barbed but statements that went beyond the mere coincidental and suggested insider knowledge. Lawrence teased himself with the possibility that Neville may have heard them making love in the afternoons. Notwithstanding possible feelings of paranoia on his part Lawrence thought that the situation now needed more vigilance. He decided that he would increase Neville's daily barbiturate dosage, just to be on the safe side.

It was something that Neville had said when he was seated at the card table that had changed the atmosphere and made Lawrence think. Unexpected and random its directness had taken Lawrence by

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surprise though he now remembered every word and detail of Neville's speech. His exact recall of Neville's words was unusual in itself as Lawrence seldom paid much attention to his crippled friend's platitudes.

- "You know that I am a very lucky man to have Judith as a wife," he had begun.

Neville had emphasized three words in the sentence. *Lucky- Judith - Wife* registered with Lawrence like a succinct telegram message. Lawrence's reaction had been forced and he recalled smiling awkwardly and nodding meekly in response. Casting a glance across the room Lawrence had also noticed Judith visibly squirming in her seat. Both lovers had picked up a tone of irony in Neville's remark which was missed by the rest of the assembled guests.

- "You will never leave me, will you darling?"
- "No, dear. We are joined at the hip," had replied Judith rather too sardonically causing Mrs Glynn to interject.
- "They are the perfect couple. Everyone says so."

There had been a brief pause before Neville's reply. It was a statement replete with significance.

- "Yes, I believe we are. Our destinies are entwined," announced Neville sounding like an erudite oracle.

At the time it wasn't clear to whom Neville was addressing this remark. Everyone in the room apart from Judith and Lawrence had

interpreted Neville's words literally not paying much attention or being too obtuse to read beyond the lines. Either that or they put their host's grandiose style down to his natural pomposity. True to form Frank Horowitz had been distracted by his own vulgar preoccupations. The ex-policeman would have loved to have been entwined with Judith to show her what she was missing, at least in his own deluded imagination. Breaking the pregnant pause following Neville's oration Mrs Burger had been the next to add her voice.

- "I still remember the wedding as if it were yesterday," she reminisced nostalgically.
- "Yes, it was a wonderful day," responded Mrs Glynn dabbing a tear in her eye with a handkerchief which she had retrieved from her handbag. "It felt like Daniel and Judith's father were looking down, and giving us all their blessings."
- "I am indeed blessed to have such a wonderful partner and such loyal friends," added Neville.

That seemingly affectionate and loving proclamation had been the clincher for Lawrence and Judith. There was no doubt that Neville knew. The question of whether their treachery would be now exposed was the couple's next worry. With his following comment Neville changed tack and granted what could only be a temporary stay of execution as far as the relieved lovers were concerned.

- “Perhaps it goes without saying, and I speak to you all as dear friends in a candid way, that Judith and I have been trying for a baby.”

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Lawrence had nearly burst out laughing at this announcement. He just about managed to disguise his scorn behind an appearance of *bonhomie* and false happiness.

- “That’s great news,” he said pretending to be overcome with emotion, a tear smudging his cheek.
- “Thank you, Lawrence. Your best wishes mean a lot to me.”

Again the cuckold’s display of cordiality had felt like a stiletto being plunged into Lawrence’s heart. Neville’s statement of appreciation had convinced everyone apart from the lovers. Lawrence felt slightly in awe and begrudgingly impressed by the invalid’s performance which was worthy of a professional actor. Their eyes met across the room and nauseatingly fake looks were exchanged causing Lawrence some embarrassment before the widow came to the rescue.

- “Oh my darling boy, that’s marvellous though I am reluctant to become a grandmother! I knew you two were up to something locked up together every afternoon.”

- “Bet you weren’t playing *Scrabble*,” said Horowitz with customary crude wit, taking the happy news as a diversion and a good opportunity to stroke Mrs Burger’s calf gently with his right shoe under the card table.

All this time Judith had bristled inside at her husband’s public deception. Showing considerable self restraint she had said nothing to contradict her husband though she had longed to wipe the smug smile off his face.

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Lawrence’s first thought was that the cunning little sod was giving his permission to carry on with the affair, either in recognition of his impotence or in order to beget himself an heir. Neville appeared to hold all the good cards but Lawrence was sure that he didn’t know about his mother’s exploits. Neville wouldn’t have been able to keep that intelligence to himself as he truly loved his mother albeit in a sickly obsessive way that bordered on the incestuous. Lawrence knew that Judith was a different matter. Their marriage was purely for convenience and Neville did not appear to mind his wife indulging her appetites elsewhere.

As Lawrence was digesting Neville’s words the widow’s brain was also working overtime. She knew that it would be perfect for her if she were to become a grandmother. The resulting domestic set up would give her more opportunities to be with Lawrence. She had

been annoyed that his homosexual neighbours had recognized her and brought an end to their weekly meetings at his apartment. A baby would be a godsend. The child would keep Neville and Judy busy and they wouldn't be able to monitor her comings and goings. Not only would the baby be a superb decoy but the family line would continue concluded Mrs Glynn. Of course she would make additional financial provision for the child's future. She decided that it would be a wonderful thing and felt elated at the prospect of her latest plan coming to fruition. The widow would finally get that beast Lawrence back in her bed where he belonged! Pleased with her son's news she smiled across at Lawrence who replied in kind. I wonder what's going through her scheming head now, he thought.

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Lawrence's own mind returned to murder. He could think of a myriad of reasons in favour and precious few for sparing the wretch Neville who was standing in his way. To compound his sense of impatience Judith was getting more and more beautiful with each passing day while Mrs Glynn was visibly ageing which made the situation maddeningly frustrating. Killing Neville would be the solution to all his frustrations given the inevitability of the whole scandal eventually going public. Lawrence knew that Mrs Glynn would react adversely if she learned of Judith's infidelity. He would

almost certainly be banned from the house which was a constant source of the most exquisite pleasures.

Lawrence tried to analyse the situation logically and identify his priorities in the light of what he did and didn't know. He wanted Judith but he didn't want the widow; that much was clear. Moreover he unequivocally wanted Neville out of the way and one day he wanted Mrs Glynn's money. He also knew that all this could be put at risk if Judith fell pregnant. Like impetuous teenagers they had not been taking the necessary precautions. Their reckless couplings had always been too frenzied and spontaneous for even the most rudimentary family planning and Lawrence had always hated wearing prophylactics. Given this abhorrence Lawrence reconsidered the possibility of Judith getting pregnant and if it would be such a bad thing. Once again it occurred to him that Neville wanted Judith to get pregnant. Yet Lawrence knew that he would not be able to accept any child of his being raised as the cripple's heir. It was this realization that finally clarified Lawrence's intentions.

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Though Lawrence had looked for alternatives the situation brokered no alternative. He was under no illusions and knew that murder was a heinous business; an act that once committed could not be taken back. Repeatedly he questioned the need for such drastic

action and whether the status quo was so terrible that it necessitated the killing of an innocent man. Lawrence knew that even at this late stage there was nothing to stop him just walking away which would be a logical solution. Running away to London would solve his problems and he could start again with another woman putting the intrigues of *The Grange* firmly behind him. That option sounded superficially attractive but he knew in his heart that it was a non-starter. He couldn't live without Judith. She was his life.

Lawrence needed Judith like a man needs food and drink. He recognized this dependence but at the same time saw in it the seeds of entrapment. Lawrence was scared of being Judith's slave for the rest of his life. He wondered if their love would continue in its present form. He had heard stories about her mother going mad and was horrified at the possibility that Judith may follow down the same path. Lawrence had seen the warning signs. At times Judith seemed unhinged. The way she buried her nails in his back and clawed at his flesh; the bites and the scratches. When she screamed at him to go *harder!* , *harder!* , *faster!* , *faster!* , he felt like her personal property. At such times Lawrence knew he was powerless to resist her insane demands even if he had wanted to rein in such a potentially dangerous hunger. Neville had been right about their destinies being entwined. Lawrence felt bound to Judith but knew that they

would face an uncertain future together. He had unleashed the carnal passions in his lover's psyche and was now and forever responsible for his lover's spiritual wellbeing. If he hadn't ventured into Judith's life she would have continued in her slumber, bored and unfulfilled but set for a comfortable life in *The Grange*. Lawrence and Judith had come too far for anything or anyone to stand in their way. He would never leave her. He would never walk away. Murder was the only option. It would be easy for a man with his strength to physically overpower a weakling like Neville. The trick would be to make it look like a natural death. Lawrence thought of various *modus operandii* that would work. In the meantime his plan was to publically treat Neville with friendliness and familiarity, giving no hint of the true nature of their relationship. Lawrence had also asked Judith to show her husband more kindness purely for appearances sake. No one could think that Judith was unhappy with the marriage least of all the widow. So far Lawrence had achieved all his aims by being patient and using discretion and he would deploy the same tactics when it came to murder. Lawrence was still sleeping with both Mrs Glynn and Judith, which he thought was testament to his cunning and an aptitude for secrecy. It was an exhausting though satisfying arrangement for the short term which Lawrence felt he could handle. The situation would be borne with

fortitude while he was waiting for the right time to commit murder. Yet he knew that any delay was strictly finite. Lawrence estimated that he only had a few weeks and possibly months before Neville blurted out the truth about his affair with his wife or Judith fell pregnant.

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In the meantime Lawrence's egotism insulated him from any feelings of remorse or anxiety. As long as he could carry on seeing Judith he wasn't worried about exposure and the affair becoming public knowledge. The only caveat was the widow. He knew that Mrs Glynn would make things very difficult if she found out. She was a woman of substantial financial means with the power to exact a devastating revenge. With that in mind Lawrence had initially considered eloping with Judith but rejected the idea. They would end up starving. Better to carry on at *The Grange* despite the logistical difficulties that it presented. Once Neville was out of the way it might even turn out to be the perfect set up. Though Lawrence wanted Judith he could continue to service the widow out of a sense of charity and expediency.

Judith wanted rid of her husband as much as her lover. She still had no idea about Lawrence's double life and the behaviour of the scheming matriarch. She started to show Neville more kindness as Lawrence had instructed

and played the part of the dutiful wife with great skill. All her life she had been quiet and demure and used to concealing her true feelings. For over a decade she had lived a lie and repressed her passions so acting was nothing new and just felt like more of the same. Moreover, she derived revengeful pleasure in deceiving her husband and mother-in-law. It was a delicious payback but for all that she still wanted to declare her love to the world. Despite the snatched moments of passion with her handsome lover she was still trapped with the domineering widow and her pathetic son. If that wasn't enough now she was pregnant with Lawrence's

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child. Events had spiralled out of control and Judith didn't know what to do. She knew that Lawrence would have to be strong for both of them.

When Lawrence heard the news he quickly made the decision. He would kill Neville that same week on the Wednesday morning. The chosen date seemed propitious and he had already mentally rehearsed the method. Judith had mentioned that she was going shopping early that day. Lawrence would let himself in via the back door with his spare key which he had had cut a couple of weeks earlier. He would just have to wait for Peggy the cleaner to leave before entering the flat. Lawrence didn't anticipate any problems and

began to fine tune the details so that no possible eventuality would be overlooked. There was only one fact that Judith had failed to mention to her lover. Unbeknown to Lawrence, Judith had told her husband that she was pregnant. At first she had attempted unsuccessfully to divert attention away from Lawrence, claiming she had conceived after a one off encounter with a stranger. It had still come as a shock that Neville knew the identity of the father even though she had suspected as much. A short exchange initiated by Neville had revealed the truth.

- "I saw you together in the spare bedroom."
- "So you've known all along?"
- "Yes. For months."
- "Why didn't you say anything?"

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- "If you want to rut like an animal then that is none of my concern."
- "He makes me feel like a woman because he is a real man!"
- "Be that as it may. You won't get a penny off me if you leave."
- "So what do you want me to do then?"
- "To carry on being married to me and be a respectable mother to the child. He or she will be my heir."

- "And what about Lawrence?"
- "You better tell him that he is not welcome at *The Grange*."
- "You don't want me to see him then?"
- "I won't tolerate the pair of you fucking in this house. What you do away from here is your business."
- "I don't need your permission to see the man I love."
- "I know. But if he comes here again then I will make your affair public. I think it's fair to say that Mother would not be impressed."
- "You are a cold fish. I wish you were out of my life," said Judith.
- "Just tell my good friend Lawrence that he is not welcome in this house anymore," said Neville finally. "I will break the happy news of your pregnancy to Mother tonight and declare myself as the father. She will be delighted by the news."

Judith had simply nodded in agreement, her mind in a whirl. She desperately needed to speak with Lawrence and decide on a joint course of action.

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Judith had walked the short distance to Lawrence's apartment. Luckily he was in and for once sat at his computer attempting to write. He was surprised to see

her when he opened the door but quickly guessed the reason for the visit.

- "We need to talk," said Judith.
- "You better come in," replied Lawrence.

Judith confirmed that Neville knew and that Lawrence was no longer welcome at *The Grange*. Additionally Mrs Glynn was to be informed of the pregnancy that evening. As Lawrence was effectively barred from *The Grange* Judith declared that she would make excuses for Lawrence's non-attendance, citing illness as the reason for his absence in the coming days and weeks.

- "He wants to raise the child as his own," said Judith. "As long as you stay away from *The Grange* he will keep our affair a secret. He doesn't care if we continue to see each other away from *The Grange*."

Lawrence gave the appearance of accepting Neville's decision. The widow's ignorance as to the true facts still presented him with an opportunity to clear up the mess and secure his own future with Judith. The young woman half heartedly protested as he led her into the bedroom. Lawrence's love making that afternoon was forceful, almost brutal. Judith sensed a change in her lover. Tomorrow was Wednesday and now there was no turning back.

The following morning Lawrence waited around the corner from *The Grange* for Peggy's car to pass. He knew that she left around 11am. Using a pay phone he had phoned *flat 2* a half an hour earlier. When Neville had answered he had replaced the receiver without speaking. Judith was out as she always responded first to phone calls. Lawrence also knew that Peggy refused to answer the phone after being chastised by Mrs Glynn once for forgetting to pass on a message from Mrs Burger. So now he was certain that Neville would be alone if he waited a short while. Inside *flat 2* Peggy was finishing off her chores. Neville was sat in his wheelchair in the lounge.

- "So I'll be on my way then Mr Glynn," said Peggy.

Neville pretended to have not heard her. Peggy was used to being ignored by the master of the house.

- "You can tell Judith that I've done my usual clean but also I have changed the linen in the spare room."
- "Thank you. I suffer from intermittent bouts of insomnia and sometimes use the spare room in order not to disturb my wife," replied Neville now eager to provide an explanation for the used bed.
- "That's all right, Mr Glynn. I understand. I sometimes find it hard to get off myself at night,"
- "Quite," replied Neville.

Insomnia my arse, thought Peggy. She could barely stand Neville for a couple of hours so she wouldn't be blaming his wife for having a bit

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on the side. While tidying the master bedroom and straightening the mistress's wardrobe Peggy had noticed that Judith had started to buy lots of pretty new clothes. There was also some racy new lingerie secreted in her underwear drawer which had also caused Peggy to raise an eyebrow. He takes her completely for granted. Fair play to her, had thought Peggy. Insomnia my arse!

- "Right, I'll be off then. See you Thursday," said Peggy closing the door of *flat 2* behind her.

Peggy's red *VW Polo* drove off on time. Lawrence watched from the bushes and remained there for a few minutes in case the cleaning lady returned. The ambulance from *North Manchester General* wouldn't arrive until midday. He had one hour to commit the deed and get well away from the scene. Lawrence took the key to the service door from his pocket and, satisfied that he was not being observed, turned the lock. Lawrence's heart pounded as he quickly made his way through the corridors to the door of *flat 2*. Inserting the key in the lock he inhaled a deep breath in an attempt to calm his nerves. He was killing for the right reasons. He was killing for the love of a woman.

Oliver looked again at the last sentence: *He was killing for the love of a woman*. The author wondered if it was a plausible enough reason for murder. *Helen of Troy* had caused a war when *Paris* took her away from *Menelaus*, so there was one precedent albeit a mythical one

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which he remembered from his classics studies at *Cheltenham College*. Oliver knew there must be countless other historical examples of countries going to war for the sake of a beautiful temptress though *Helen* was the only one that sprang immediately to mind. Then there were crimes of passion which he had read about in France where until relatively recently it had been used as a defence to exonerate murderous husbands. Men who had killed their cheating wives in revengeful moments of temporarily induced madness were excused their crimes. Short of the court having a whip round and giving the poor murdering husband a few *francs* killing an unfaithful wife seemed a perfectly acceptable practice if a man's reason was impeded by the red mist of jealousy. Taking this idea to its logical conclusion the killer in Judith Glynn should be Neville. No, it was too late to change the central motif of the plot, thought Oliver. Neville was to be the victim in

Oliver's scenario and Lawrence his executioner. It was too late to stop that *denouement*.

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Chapter 11 - *Murder and Aftermath*

Lawrence turned the door handle and entered the hallway of *flat 2*. He stood motionless for a few seconds and listened. The faint sound of the radio could be heard from the living room; people with educated accents talking earnestly. He looked at himself in the ornate mirror that hung on the wall by the door and flexed his powerful hands. Lawrence was struck by his own size and dark brooding features which looked feral in such domesticated surroundings. He studied his face trying to discern in it some trace of doubt or weakness but saw only strength and determination. Like most big men he didn't regard himself as abnormally large but today he saw himself for what he was.

Lawrence Ross was a physically strong man intent on violence; an irresistible force that would not be denied. Nevertheless it still felt like he was playing the part of an assassin in a movie; his presence here seemed so *clichéd* and artificial. Lawrence put such idle thoughts out of his mind. He knew that this was as real as life could get. Today he would give full vent to the dark violence that had always lurked in the shadowy recesses of his soul. Since childhood it had been repressed by middle class *mores* and convention. Now at last he could feel his malevolent nature breaking free of its shackles. This would be for his father and mother, the years of underachievement, and for all those who had ever doubted his exceptional talent. It would rival the best orgasm ever to snuff out the person who symbolised everything that he loathed. No longer

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would Neville Glynn stand in the way of his personal fulfilment and self actualisation.

Taking a deep breath he composed himself and quickly went over the plan again in his mind. First he would talk with Neville and set the record straight. Lawrence wanted Neville to be in full possession of the facts while he was still alive. He wanted to enjoy the invalid's pain at the news of Mrs Glynn's sexual exploits; destroy once and for all his misplaced devotion and *Oedipal* affection for his trollop of a mother. The rest would be easy

enough like swatting an irksome fly. He had more than enough time to act out his fantasy. First there would be talk and then the murder. As Lawrence turned towards his target he experienced a sense of calm devoid of doubts or second thoughts. He had prepared well and felt confident that he would be able to execute his plan. Silently Lawrence made his way to the living room where he knew his intended victim would be sat in his wheelchair hunched over his desk or beloved chess board.

Sure enough Neville was placing a white chess piece on a dark square as Lawrence entered the room. He didn't appear surprised when he finally looked up at his uninvited guest. The two men faced each other with barely concealed malice.

- "So you even have your own key?" said Neville.
"That belongs to me now, I think."

Neville held out his hand and unthinkingly Lawrence handed him the key.

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- "I see that you chose to ignore my wish that you should never enter these premises again," continued Neville.
- "I wanted to see you one last time," replied Lawrence.

- "Well, what I said to my cheating wife I may as well repeat to you in person."
- "There's no need. I know what you want."
- "And you know that I am prepared to tell my mother all about your sordid little goings on if you ever show your face round here again?"
- "Yes I do," replied a cruelly smiling Lawrence. "But what you don't know is that I have been sleeping with your mother as well as your wife all these months."

Neville's face turned ashen at this revelation.

- "You are a liar!"
- "You seriously believe that I have only been getting tea and cakes on Wednesday afternoons?"
- "My mother is not like that. She is a fine upstanding woman."
- "Save your delusions for the Burgers and the Horowitzs. Secretly you have always known what she is really like."
- "I don't believe you. First you screw my wife and now you try and turn me against my mother. You are evil."
- "Evil? Your wonderful mother even wears the pearls in bed that your father bought her. I could describe every mark on her body if you would like."

- "You filthy swine!" screamed Neville. "How could you?"

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- "She's a very attractive woman your mother, especially with her clothes off, and very creative in the sack."
- "You dog!" shouted Neville as he tried to rise from his chair and rush at Lawrence. He fell to the ground in a heap.

Lawrence picked up a cushion from the sofa and stood over the invalid. Neville's feeble limbs writhed in a futile attempt to get back into his wheelchair; his idiot mouth gaping like a fish deprived of air. Lawrence momentarily considered doing nothing. Neville was having one of his breathing attacks and dangerously hyper-ventilating but his death in itself was never ever going to be enough. Lawrence wanted to dispatch this pathetic specimen himself and finally put the wretch out of his misery with his bare hands. With a frightening glint in his eye Lawrence effortlessly pinned the invalid to the ground and pressed his nose up against his former friend's face. Neville tried to spit in his tormentor's face but his mouth was dry and he had no saliva. Even this one last act of defiance had been denied to Neville Glynn. Like a capital judge donning the black cap Lawrence passed judgement on the condemned man;

his words were all the more chilling for their gravity and precision.

- "Neville, you will soon be dead. I am happy that you finally know about everything that has been going on here and at my apartment and that I was the one to break the news."
- "You evil bastard!"
- "You don't know what you've been missing with Judith all these years."

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- "You animal. Our relationship was on a higher plane than the merely sexual."
- "You delude yourself. She never loved you. Don't you see that a woman needs a real man?"
- "Go to hell!"
- "Maybe I will but I still have other business to attend to before that. Your mother for example. She will be inconsolable but I will try my best to cheer her up and think of you while I am doing it. I bet she will look stunning dressed in black. Goodbye, old boy," said Lawrence.

With knees pressed down hard on Neville's chest and one hand raising his victim's jaw Lawrence held the cushion in his other hand; the cushion that completely smothered Neville's face. The flow of oxygen to Neville's lungs and brain was cut off. It didn't take more than a couple of minutes for Neville's desperate

struggle to cease and satisfy his killer that the deed was done. Lawrence removed the cushion and studied Neville's features which had distorted in the throes of death. His eyes didn't appear any more bloodshot than usual but the look on his face suggested a mixture of fear and surprise, with the hint of a sneer thrown in for good measure. Typical Neville, thought Lawrence. Prising back the fingers of his victim's right hand he recovered the spare service door key and appraised the scene. It looked like Neville had suffered an acute asthma attack and fallen from his chair. He had seemingly made an attempt to crawl across the room and reach the phone to summon help. It was an entirely plausible explanation that would be accepted by *Greater*

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Manchester Police. They were under resourced and didn't have enough detectives to pursue sleuth like investigations. Given Neville's medical history a verdict of death by natural causes would be rubber-stamped and processed quickly. Satisfied with his work Lawrence locked *flat 2* behind him and hurried down the passageway that led to the rear exit. No one saw him climb through the hedgerow and briskly make his way back to his apartment. Lawrence was certain that he was going to get away with it...

At five minutes after twelve the ambulance man rang the bell to *flat 2*. Usually Neville was outside waiting in his wheelchair and would complain if the driver was late. After the third ring Mrs Glynn appeared at her window and pulled back the sliding door.

- "Is he not answering?" asked Mrs Glynn.
- "No, Mrs Glynn. I've rang a couple of times and there's no answer," he replied.

She's not bad for an old bird. I wouldn't say no, thought the ambulance man.

- "Hang on. I'll get the spare key and we can see what is delaying him. Maybe he has fallen asleep?"

As Mrs Glynn entered *flat 2* with the ambulance driver following it wasn't long before they made their grisly discovery. Neighbours later remarked that the widow's blood curdling screams could be heard throughout *The Grange*. The shock of finding her son dead had caused the widow to suffer a devastating stroke.

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All those years that she had nursed her sickly son flashed before her eyes and for it all to come to this! The light faded as the blood vessel burst in her brain and she was starved of oxygen. The paramedic was able to alert the emergency services and Mrs Glynn was rushed to *North Manchester General*. However, there

was a delay in getting the widow the attention she desperately needed at the over stretched *Accident & Emergency Department*. From that day on Mrs Glynn was to be wheelchair bound like her son as well as being physically unable to speak. The light of intelligence still shone in the eyes of the grieving mother but that was the only evidence of vitality. After months of diligent rehabilitation in which she listened to endless hours of *Mozart* on a set of headphones her brain function was partly restored. Alas she now found herself mute, entombed in a lifeless quadriplegic body.

Lawrence attended Neville's funeral which Judith had to quickly arrange alone, but stayed away from *The Grange* in the subsequent weeks. Mrs Glynn was still in a critical state in hospital and Lawrence felt it prudent to absent himself from *The Grange* for a respectful period of time. He reasoned that it would arouse suspicions if he spent too much time alone with the young widow and that besides there was now the added consideration of her advanced pregnancy. He couldn't risk admitting to murder and upsetting the mother of his child. The resultant stress caused by such a revelation might damage the unborn baby. But she must have her suspicions, thought Lawrence. Hadn't she repeatedly wished that Neville was dead?

He would wait for the right moment to confess his deed. Then they could be together as they had always planned.

Six months elapsed before *Thursday Bridge Nights* resumed. A lot had happened in the hiatus, not least the arrival of Neville Junior, a dark haired baby boy, and the recent return of Mrs Glynn from hospital after a long period of rehabilitation. In all that time Lawrence had not been alone with Judith. Nor had he made his confession. Lawrence, feeling that six months apart was long enough, had contacted Frank Horowitz and asked him to arrange *The Grange* get-together with Judith. He wanted to know where he stood with the young widow and if she still loved him as before. Judith had been amenable to the reunion idea, which Lawrence had taken as an encouraging sign. Naturally the Horowitzs and Burgers were delighted that their weekly entertainment was going to resume, as if nothing untoward had ever happened. At last they would be able to convene again in convivial surroundings and enjoy once more the delicious sophistication of Thursday nights at *The Grange*.

Lawrence was the last guest to arrive on that fated first meeting. A smiling Horowitz had opened the door to *flat* 2 and escorted the young man into the lounge where the assembled company were already gathered.

- "Here he is. *The Young Turk!*" exclaimed Horowitz.

Lawrence quickly took in the scene. Mrs Glynn was sat motionless in a wheelchair by the fireplace. The old woman's gaze fixed on the

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young man but her face was expressionless. To think that I was undressing her not long ago and stifling her screams, thought Lawrence. He looked at the widow briefly and felt uncomfortable before searching the room for Judith. She was coming out of the kitchen holding a tray of snacks when their eyes met. She held his stare with those deep penetrating dark eyes and smiled warmly. Judith is still mine, he thought.

- "Thank you for coming Lawrence," she said calmly.
- "It's my pleasure," replied Lawrence formally.

She's a cool one, he noted with admiration. Judith sombrely attired in black was more beautiful than ever.

- "Glad you could make it," said Mrs Burger.

Lawrence nodded in acknowledgement. The former *Mayor of Salford* looked transformed and twenty years younger. Nothing could be done about the buck teeth but the severe wire framed spectacles had gone in favour of contact lenses. Her overall appearance was

noticeably softer and more feminine. As for Mr Burger and Mrs Horowitz, the beanpole ex-clerk was still as unprepossessing as ever and Horowitz's emaciated wife was sat on the sofa greedily stuffing her face with a bowl of what looked like spicy prawns. Peggy broke the momentary silence when she entered from the hallway.

- "The baby is sleeping now, Judith."

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Lawrence noted the Irish woman's relaxed manner with Judith. His lover now appeared to be the mistress of the house. Peggy had completely ignored Mrs Glynn's presence not that she could have responded in any verbal or physical way.

- "Thank you, Peggy. I'll look in on him shortly," replied Judith. "You can go now if you like and I'll see you as usual in the morning."
- "I'll be off then, Judith. You all have a pleasant evening," said Peggy.

As Peggy left Judith was quick to ring her praises.

- "That woman has been an absolute saint. I would not be able to cope with the baby and looking after mother without her."
- "You've a good one there," said Horowitz. "No doubt about it."

- "She comes in every day now and I pay her a bit over minimum wage as a token of my gratitude."
- "I'm sure she deserves it," said Lawrence.

A deflated Lawrence realized that seeing Judith alone at *The Grange* was now impossible. It wouldn't be feasible to drug Peggy, and the Wednesday afternoon window of opportunity had died with Neville. There would be no more creeping through hedgerows and sneaking in via the back service door; something which he had hated at the time but now longed for. To compound matters Judith would be preoccupied with the baby and the business of looking after the new

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invalid in her life. Where would she find time for Lawrence in her hectic schedule? The old lady's stroke and its consequences had completely undermined his devious plan. Lawrence cursed his bad luck.

- "Would you like to see *Baby Neville*?" asked Judith of Lawrence.

Baby fucking Neville! You are having a laugh, thought Lawrence struggling to contain his outrage.

- "Yes. Certainly," replied Lawrence.
- "Excuse us both for a minute will you," said Judith to the guests before leading Lawrence to the spare bedroom.

Lawrence had a flash of *déjà-vu* but the present scenario was devoid of sexual expectancy. He was only nervous at the thought of seeing his son. As Lawrence looked down at the baby boy he shed an involuntary tear.

- "He looks like you," said Judith, reaching for her lover's hand.
- "Yes he does," said Lawrence. "Just as well that you have dark hair as well."
- "Just as well."

Lawrence touched the infant's cheek with a broad finger and turned to Judith.

- "We need to talk," he said.
- "I know, but not now," replied Judith.

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- "When?" he asked.
- "Tomorrow morning. I'll make some excuse and leave Peggy in charge. At your apartment about *10am*."
- "Tomorrow at ten," he confirmed.
- "We had better be getting back to the guests," said Judith.

Lawrence nodded in assent. The couple left their baby sleeping in the spare room and silently closed the door. On re-entering the lounge Horowitz noticed that Lawrence had been crying.

- "Get to you did it, Lawrence?" asked the former policeman.
- "Sorry?" replied Lawrence.
- "Seeing the baby. Did it get to you?" repeated Horowitz.
- "Yes. Seeing Neville's son just brought it home that my best friend is no longer with us," said Lawrence.
- "It's a bloody tragedy. That's what it is," said Horowitz.
- "Yes, a terrible tragedy," interjected Mrs Burger. "The night before it happened Rachel had phoned me with the good news about the baby. She was overjoyed."

The assembled company turned to look at Mrs Glynn who sat impassively in her wheelchair like a waxwork dummy.

- "How is Mrs Glynn?" asked Lawrence keen to get off the subject of the baby.
- "She needs round the clock care," replied Judith. "So far Peggy and I have managed but we may have to take on another carer."

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- "Anyone in mind?" asked Mrs Burger.
- "I was thinking of contacting Bridie, our former cleaner," said Judith.

- "The underwear woman?" asked a grinning Horowitz.
- "I'm not sure I believe that story. All I have of Bridie are fond memories. I think maybe that Daniel made it up or exaggerated. Perhaps there was another reason for her dismissal?" said Judith.

Unnoticed Mrs Glynn's eyes momentarily flickered with anger at this piece of *innuendo*.

- "Still, you better lock up your knickers just in case," joked Horowitz. Nobody else laughed and the former policeman felt foolish.
- "Right now I need all the help I can get and my knickers are the least of my concerns, Frank," she replied.
- "Yes, I'm sorry," said a crestfallen Horowitz.
- "How do you feed her?" asked Lawrence still trying to come to terms with Mrs Glynn's incapacity while inappropriately summoning up the image of cream cakes.
- "She can just about swallow liquids though it's a messy process and other nutrients she gets fed intravenously," explained Judith.
- "Does she take in her surroundings?" asked Lawrence.
- "I think so. You can see emotion in her eyes when she is agitated or needs something," said Judith. "Though it's

- difficult to know just how engaged she is with her environment.”
- “It’s a double tragedy,” said Horowitz.
- “What about the living arrangements?”, asked Lawrence eager to get a handle on the new daily routine.
- “Mother sleeps in the main bedroom while I share the spare with *Baby Neville*,” explained Judith. “*Flat 1* has been put on the market and we will all live here in *flat 2*. I may need to buy a sofa bed for Peggy if she has to stay overnight.”

Oliver had got the idea of suffocation by pillow from the scene in *The Godfather 2* when a Sicilian assassin tries smothering *Hyman Roth*. Doing a bit of research on asphyxiation he also learned about the notorious Scottish murderers *Burke* and *Hare* who had used the same *modus operandi* for dispatching their victims. The technique of smothering by pillow while simultaneously using compression on the chest became known as *burking*, and a posthumous and dubious claim to fame for its inventors and infamous exponents. Of course Oliver had fantasized about wiping out *Cheltenham College* with a high calibre machine gun but the thought of smothering someone with one’s bare hands.....well, it didn’t bear thinking about. For one he wasn’t physically strong enough and secondly it was just too

up close and personal for Oliver's tastes. Yet Oliver had seen dead bodies and even touched their cold skin. He had worked as a porter at *Manchester Royal Infirmary* for six months and frequently had to visit the mortuary. Part of his job had been to transport cadavers

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from the wards to the basement, affectionately known as *the disco*. In the end he had left the job because of the rigid hierarchy in the *National Health Service*. Oliver had hated the condescension of the nurses and in all honesty he hadn't needed the money.

Chapter 12 - *Confession*

Lawrence felt no remorse, being more concerned with the practicalities of the new set up at *The Grange* and how he could circumvent such tiresome obstacles to his pleasure. His plan to rid himself of Neville and Rachel had worked out perfectly in all but one respect. In his mind he could not have foreseen or indeed be blamed for Mrs Glynn's stroke. The invalid old lady was now cramping his style, so in a way he felt that he was more than paying for his crime. He comforted himself with the knowledge that one day soon, after the old woman died, there would be nothing to prevent the full expression of his love for Judith. The situation demanded just a little more patience. In the meantime he intended to grab moments of passion with the young woman whenever and wherever the opportunity presented itself.

Others had not handled the suspension of pleasure with equanimity either. Mrs Burger and Frank Horowitz had selfishly missed Thursday nights and grew increasingly

restless with each missed week. It was most inconvenient that Neville had died and subsequent events, namely Mrs Glynn's stroke and the arrival of the baby, had only further delayed the resumption of normal service. They not only greatly enjoyed the cards but also the opportunity that *Bridge* provided for certain covert activities. Sharing the same foot fetish Horowitz and Mrs Burger both liked to play games under the table. He would surreptitiously slip off a shoe once the game had started and gently caress the former alderwoman's shin. She loved this

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naughtiness on Frank's part and both would get aroused while pretending to be engrossed in the bidding and tricking. Horowitz remembered doing the same to Rachel when Daniel had been present at the *Broughton Park* house. It was the foreplay that had led to secret afternoons in hotels.

Mrs Burger and Horowitz had been determined to restore *Thursday Bridge Night* to the weekly calendar. They realized however that with Neville and Mrs Glynn out of commission they would be two card players down on the requisite *quorum* of four. With this in mind Mrs Burger had used the last six months to teach her husband the rudiments of *Contract Bridge*. Meanwhile Lawrence had used the *moratorium* to brush up on his own knowledge of the game but he had his own

separate agenda. Feigning an interest in cards would disguise his real motivation for visiting *The Grange* and in the process give his presence added legitimacy. As the players took their seats that evening Lawrence was paired with Mr Burger against the experienced Mrs Burger-Frank Horowitz combination.

And so the actors each played his or her part in this *clichéd* drama. There was the mute old mother sat motionless in her chair, supported by the young widow stoically coping with the old lady's care and a demanding infant. Cameo turns were provided by supportive family friends ably assisting the Glynn family through this difficult time, and then to complete the *dramatis personae* an inconsolable Lawrence. He was cast as the male lead; a brother in all but name to the recently departed Neville.

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Self preservation and a total absence of remorse allowed Lawrence to convincingly deliver his *bravura* performance. As he threw down another card he thought of Judith naked again in his bed. Tomorrow he would confess his crime to Judith. He wasn't certain how she would take the news. Nevertheless Lawrence smiled lecherously to himself at the thought of getting Judith alone.

Judith arrived at Lawrence's apartment promptly the next morning. Wearing a stern expression and refusing his kisses she stood facing her former lover.

- "Not now. We must talk," she implored.
- "I know. I am not sure how to begin though," said Lawrence.
- "Then I will say it for you. You killed Neville!" she exclaimed.
- "Yes I did," confirmed Lawrence matter-of-factly.
- "Oh my God!" screamed Judith. "How?"
- "With a cushion."
- "How could you?"
- "But you wanted me to do it," pleaded Lawrence.

Lawrence moved forward to take Judith in his arms and assert his power.

- "Don't touch me you monster, you devil!"
- "You make me sound supernatural. I don't believe in a devil taking human form."
- "You are not human and you are not a devil. You are death."

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- "I suppose that means a screw is out of the question," joked Lawrence in a pathetic attempt to lighten the mood.

Judith gave him a withering look of contempt as Lawrence stepped back. He did not want to take her by force and was relieved by her rejection, feeling completely devoid of passion. He tried appealing to her sense of reason.

- "You said to me on several occasions, if only he were dead. Your meaning was clear."
- "I didn't think that you would actually do it."
- "I did it so that we could be together."
- "But how can I love a murderer?"
- "You are in a state of shock. You must have known all along but hearing my confession has caused you to feel guilt and repugnance."

Judith paused to gather her thoughts. Then she spoke calmly.

- "What you did was so wrong and we will be punished for all eternity. You for killing an innocent man and me for committing adultery."
- "What are you saying? You know I don't go in for all that religious claptrap."
- "One day you will accept the gravity of what you have done."
- "What's done is done. Now we can get on with our lives," he begged her to see.
- "I have to raise our son and look after Mother."

- "But what about us?"
- "I can't think about us right now. I don't even know if we have a future."
- "Okay, maybe we should cool things for a while. We still need to be cautious."
- "Yes. Right now sex is the last thing on my mind," stated Judith emphatically.

Lawrence reluctantly agreed with a desultory nod of the head. He didn't have the strength to argue and tried instead to compromise.

- "I will continue to visit you on Thursday nights. It would look odd if I suddenly stopped attending."
- "Yes, okay. I will see you on Thursday but do not turn up at *The Grange* at any other time."
- "Agreed," concluded Lawrence.

With that Judith left the apartment. She didn't even give her former lover a peck on the cheek.

Left alone and feeling aggrieved at Judith's lack of gratitude Lawrence needed answers to some serious questions. What had been the point of killing Neville if Judith now no longer wanted him? It felt like a different person had committed the murder; someone who had been bewitched and was so drunk with passion that they had acted purely on impulse. Lawrence was no longer under Judith's spell, especially in the light of what had just been said, and the full horror and

magnitude of what he had done in her name began to take shape in his mind. His first concern was to avoid blame for the crime. If Judith ever pointed the finger in his direction he would take her down with him. He sensed that she understood the unspoken rules of mutually assured destruction and would keep her mouth shut. This was no *zero-sum game* where one person's gain is directly offset by another's loss. He reasoned that at least the true paternity of *Baby Neville* was known only to himself and Judith, and thankfully that his affair with Mrs Glynn would now remain a secret forever. He might still be able to find a way of being reunited with Judith in the future, but only if she could learn to love him again. At that moment it seemed like a distant possibility.

Lawrence's nature changed in the six months following the murder. He spent his days in a slothful stupor, trying to write and drink his time away in the local bars. Waiting for his eventual marriage to Judith had dampened his ardour to the extent that he seldom thought about her anymore. He considered running away and thought that perhaps he had been lucky in breaking her stranglehold on his affections. Judith had made him lose his mind and if they were to be reunited he ran the risk of going mad again. Lawrence

recognized that in their time together he had been a slave to his animal like passions. He had always liked women but not to the point of self-destruction. Yet for all that, the fire she had engendered in his heart had imbued him with strength and certainty. Without Judith he was a more thoughtful man, but with these new found sensibilities came cautiousness to the point of cowardice. On his own Lawrence

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had changed into an indecisive man lacking in confidence. Why had he killed Neville? Was it all to be for nothing? Lawrence wanted to be understood and all guilty men seek mitigation. He knew that much. Shortly after the crime he had drunkenly confessed in *The Donkey*. Luckily no one had taken him seriously in that most disreputable of all dive bars.

- “I dared to kill an insect. I raised my foot and smashed it down!” he had shouted at the barman shortly before being ejected from the premises.

His instinct was to run, maybe even leave the country, but he couldn't do it. Lawrence was bound to Judith by the blood and horror of what he had done. He wished that he was insane so that he didn't feel like the louse that he had killed, and continued to torture himself with recriminations. He had thought that he had courage but now realized that he was a mediocre piece of excrement just like everybody else. Confessing to God,

that balm of the feeble minded, was out of the question as he didn't believe. Similarly, going to the police was not an option for someone as proud as Lawrence. They would laugh in his face if they discovered that he had killed Neville for no reason, there being nothing quite as risible as the motiveless crime. Lawrence needed to believe that the murder was justified and not just a sick joke at his expense. He needed to be hopeful about the future. Marriage to Judith could rekindle his desire and then there was the money that she would inherit. Money always helped.

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Each night Lawrence awoke seized with panic. The recurring image of Neville's grinning death mask continued to haunt him. Judith would be forever associated with Neville and now there was a child called Neville to further cement the memory of his crime. Drinking during the day helped him to forget but there was no escape at night when the full magnitude of his misdeed relentlessly thwarted any attempts at sleep. Yet for all his torment Lawrence did not feel sorry for killing Neville. Lawrence suspected that Judith experienced remorse for her part in the crime but put that down to her sex and upbringing. She had female sensibilities and religious succour to give her strength.

Lawrence knew that if he told the police he might get out of prison before he reached fifty. He quickly dismissed that option in the same way that he ruled out suicide. He was too selfish and lacked the bravery for such principled courses of action. For now he would just wait and hope that Judith rediscovered her love. Lawrence knew that he was capable of punishing himself without resorting to extreme forms of self harm. He vowed to not give up hope completely. He thought about all the crooks in the world making millions with impunity and believed that he was a better man. A drunken old hag in *The Red Lion* had tried to give him a silver plated crucifix in exchange for a drink. Lawrence had thrown it back in her face.

- "I don't need your bloody cross!" he had screamed.

No one was sitting in judgement apart from Judith. Neville's death had been explained away by natural causes. All he had to do was keep his mouth shut.

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Judith had walked back to *The Grange* at a sedate pace. She needed time to think. Though she had suspected Lawrence all along his glib admission had brought home the full horror of the crime. Perhaps a part of her had subconsciously refused to accept the grisly fact but now her fears had been confirmed with absolute certainty. Judith's lustful fever had been calmed and the flame of

desire extinguished with her husband's death. Now she felt indifferent and even fearful of Lawrence; a man capable of anything. That much had been proved. She didn't even know if she was safe with him anymore or if she had ever been safe. Judith conceded that she was happy now she didn't have to lie next to Neville's puny body ever again, yet her sense of guilt was overwhelming. She questioned whether she had unwittingly misled Lawrence and if she was now paying the price for encouraging him to kill. Certainly her adultery had saddled her with a burdensome mother-in-law and a diabolical child which she believed was God's punishment.

Judith questioned her motivations for cheating on her husband. Maybe it hadn't been all about wanting Lawrence, but more about getting away from Neville. Judith now felt like a better person and this was her one consolation; her desires were under control and she was living for others. At times it was like being a little girl again, like a virgin, before Lawrence and all that sex business. She knew that she couldn't undo the act of murder, but maybe she could atone for her sin of adultery by living a virtuous life. Lawrence's weekly visit to *The Grange* would act as a constant reminder but she would have to be strong. Happily Judith had her consolation in religion.

Thursday night came around and the usual suspects were assembled. Lawrence arrived last in the hope that his entrance would have maximum dramatic impact. From now on he would play the part of sensitive family friend, doting on Mrs Glynn and behaving like a brother to Judith. Every week he would ring the praises of his recently deceased friend and ingratiate himself into the company of the Burgers and Frank Horowitz. As Lawrence looked at his hand and then across the table at his playing partner Mr Burger he thought it was now as good a time as any to pursue his self serving agenda.

- "You know, even though it's been a few months now getting to grips with his loss, I still miss Neville's company and his razor like mind."

What's he playing at?, thought Judith. It sounds like he is talking about someone else.

- "I know what you mean, Lawrence. I miss the little fellow's ready wit and sense of humour," affirmed Horowitz.
- "Yes, he certainly had a very dry view of the world," said Mrs Burger.
- "Positively arid," joked Horowitz.

Nobody laughed as Mrs Glynn's eyes burned brightly. The invalid was sat in the corner of the room out of the way much as Judith had been ignored for ten years. The young widow, with a new found confidence, now

positioned herself nearer to the card game and engaged more frequently with the guests.

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- "He was one heck of a *Bridge* player," added Mr Burger, which coming from him was no compliment at all.
- "Yes indeed. The man was a border line genius. Not only an accomplished card player but also a consummate chess expert. He could have been a *Grand Master* in my opinion if he had taken it more seriously, but that was just the modesty of the man. At the end of the day he realized that games were just that and his wife and mother were far more important," eulogized Lawrence.
- "That's very kind of you to say so," said Judith in response, at the same time wondering why Lawrence was serving up such glowing praise for her late husband.
- "Yes, Neville was a pious man devoted to his family and I miss him terribly at times like this," added Lawrence.
- "Neville is irreplaceable and will forever be in our hearts," said Judith.
- "*Amen* to that," declared Lawrence.
- "Here, here!" agreed Horowitz.
- "How's the writing going, Lawrence?" asked Judith.

Lawrence was put on the defensive. He couldn't tell them that he had dropped out of the *Salford University* doctoral program and was suffering an acute form of writer's block.

- "Not bad," he lied. "I am making significant progress."
- "Can you share anything specific with us?" asked Judith.

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The bitch, thought Lawrence.

- "Well as you know it's a contemporary tale of lust, murder and madness. I am currently reading the related definitive texts in psychopathology and criminology. Good writing is part research and part creativity," he replied trying to bluster his way out of an awkward situation.
- "Sounds fascinating. How long do you think you will need?" asked Judith.
- "Well, you can't rush these things but I am looking at another eighteen months before we go to publication."
- "I can't wait," said Judith.

If only she pursued my body with such enthusiasm, thought Lawrence before continuing.

- "You will be the first to receive a copy. Neville's passing has given me a sense of renewed energy and purpose. I will dedicate the book to him, with your permission."
- "I am sure he would be greatly honoured were he alive," replied Judith.

This exchange between the secret former lovers produced smiles around the table. Even Mrs Glynn inwardly rejoiced at the devotion of her daughter-in-law and her son's best friend. There was a lull in the conversation before Judith spoke once more.

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- "This is a bit delicate but I was wondering if someone could help me carry Mrs Glynn into the master bedroom. I usually change her about this time."
- "I will help if you like," offered Lawrence.

Without waiting for a reply Lawrence rose from the card table and walked over to the old lady's chair. Placing one arm around her back and the other securely under her legs he effortlessly lifted Mrs Glynn from the chair.

- "Follow me," said Judith.

Lawrence walked slowly from the room with the old widow held in his arms like a sleeping child. Preceding

Judith into the master bedroom Lawrence lay the invalid on top of the bed, while the young woman silently clicked the door shut.

- "Just what do you think you are playing at?" asked a visibly angry Judith.
- "What do you mean?" replied Lawrence.

Such was Mrs Glynn's lifelessness the former lovers ignored her presence in the room as she lay on the bed listening to their every hateful word, the mutual recriminations, and the start of a hateful two-way blame game.

Oliver understood Lawrence's plight. He too was a lonely man unable to accept the soothing embrace and succour of religion; it being

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bound up with so many bad memories not least from his schooldays. Every morning the assembled boys and masters had sung the hymn *Jerusalem* in the venerable Cheltenham chapel while Oliver had mimed the words. The old boys who had fallen in two world wars were listed on a large memorial plaque in the entrance hall of the school, adorned with wreaths of poppies once a year on *Remembrance Day*. Presumably they had sung the same hymn before marching off to slaughter convinced in their minds that God was on their side, the

side of the righteous. Now years later he lived in the shadows of the dark satanic mills, long since gone, and was more of a confirmed atheist than ever.

If only one could have the power of invisibility. Oliver would be able to creep into the widow's flat and spend the evening with her unobserved. He thought about his own fictional story: an invisible presence would be a silent witness, no more real than a quadriplegic mute Mrs Glynn. Believing in invisible cloaks was like believing in God. Oliver wanted to believe but he needed proof. Proof beyond all reasonable doubt was the cornerstone of the criminal justice system and science. Oliver still didn't understand why the authorities had taken the word of that stupid fat nurse over his. He had lost his job at the hospital because of it, taking her word over his in the complete absence of any tangible proof.

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Chapter 13 - *The Artist*

Lawrence had tried to make progress with his novel; the literary masterpiece that would make him famous and rich. There were encouraging signs that his writer's block was coming to an end. The months following the crime had been spent in deep reflection, usually over a

pint of *Holt's bitter* in *The Donkey*. His new best pal, Flynn, was the local genius and sensitive father figure Lawrence had always wanted. Flynn was a well travelled man with varied and interesting life experiences. He was very different from the callow spoilt children that Lawrence had tried to avoid at *Salford University*. Of rugged scruffy appearance, Flynn was a short stocky man about sixty years old with an unruly mop of wiry grey hair and a puckish glint in his eye. This second generation Irish pub philosopher and *magus* used *The Donkey* as his sitting room and study. Lawrence became his willing apprentice.

Each day Flynn would sit in his favourite corner seat. From opening to closing time he always had a drink in front of him and occasionally would accept a sandwich from the kind hearted landlady. All of his money was spent on beer and he cared little for his physical well being. Lawrence had shown him extracts from his fledgling novel and Flynn had provided some interesting insights after first probing the aspiring author's motivations.

- "So tell me Lawrence, why are you trying to write a novel?"
- "It's something that I have always wanted to do."

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- "I always fancied being an astronaut as a wee boy but I gave up on the idea when I grew up."

- "You think I'm being childish?"
- "Maybe. It depends if you have a real talent or not. Merely acting like the latest *James Joyce* isn't enough. I've seen plenty of those come and go in here."
- "Well, you've read a sample of my work; the first fifty pages from my novel and a couple of recent short stories. What do you think?"

Flynn took a sip of his beer before replying. He looked Lawrence straight in the eyes.

- "All your writing seems the same."
- "In what way?"
- "It's always concerned with the same subject matter."
- "But my subjects vary."
- Perhaps, but your underlying preoccupations remain constant. You are obsessed with sex, murder and then a struggle for redemption - biblical themes as old as the hills."
- "Aren't they the staples of any good novel?"
- "They can be but it's hard to be original. Have they not been done to death enough in the past?"
- "Are you thinking of any author in particular?" asked Lawrence.
- "Well, *Zola* springs to mind."
- "You've read *Therese Raquin*?"

- "I've read everything that *Zola* ever wrote; the title you mention as well as the entire *Rougon-Macquart* series of novels."

Lawrence smiled at Flynn's erudition before replying. The rum old codger never ceased to surprise the younger man with his encyclopaedic knowledge.

- "I have to concede that I am influenced by *Zola* but there are others."
- "Don't tell me! There's *Madame Bovary* by *Flaubert* and *Lady Chatterley's Lover* by *D.H. Lawrence*, your name sake. You have a penchant for the scandalous *avant-garde*."
- "The subject of adultery and its repercussions fascinates me."
- "Are you talking from personal experience?"
- "No, absolutely not. My writing comes from the imagination."

Flynn looked at Lawrence doubtfully and took another sip of beer.

- "If you say so Lawrence. Your work reads like it is heavily autobiographical. "
- "Nevertheless, I can assure you that it is pure fiction."
- "Yet you use your own name for the central male character."

- "I can relate to the Lawrence in the novel."
- "To the point of being a murderer?"
- "Possibly."
- "You confessed to murder in here the other night. Do you remember?"

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- "Vaguely. I was very drunk."
- "Just as well no one took you seriously."
- "Clearly the idea is preposterous."
- "That's what everybody thought."
- "Anyway I am not barred."
- "No one gets barred for long. It's virtually impossible to get your ticket from *The Donkey*," said Flynn.

There was a pause in the conversation before a smiling Flynn resumed.

- "So how are you going to develop this novel? If memory serves me right *Therese Raquin* ended up a trite Gothic horror story with the tortured adulteress and her lover committing joint suicide - a touch of the *Romeo and Juliets*."
- "No I don't think that is the way I will go with it. My preference at this stage is for a more realistic denouement with a greater degree of moral ambiguity. Perhaps the protagonists don't get their just desserts after all."

- "You might be on shaky ground there young fella'. People don't like it if the bad guys win. A novel is first and foremost a moral tract."
- "Granted but we now live in less morally certain times. Don't people want shades of grey?"
- "Maybe you are right. Good writing is good writing and the subject matter is secondary. Form is what counts."
- "Would you like another pint, Flynn?"

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- "Is *The Pope* a *Catholic*?"

Lawrence returned from the bar with two fresh pints of bitter. He loved this early afternoon time of day when he was still reasonably sober and the world seemed full of possibilities. Shafts of light filtered through the cracked stained glass windows causing Lawrence to squint in the glare as swirls of dust circled in the fusty air. It was impossible to make out Flynn's facial expression. Lawrence could discern the shape of his silhouetted square head with its mass of hair; Flynn the dissolute whiskey priest, a father confessor tortured by his own demons, dispensing sage advice and yet lacking personal insight. All this thought Lawrence as the old juke box played *The Fields of Athenry*.

- "I was thinking of maybe styling the second half of the novel on *Crime and Punishment*," said Lawrence.

- "Ah, *Dostoevsky*! I suppose a lengthy discourse on morality with lots of soul searching would be one way of continuing the tale," replied Flynn. "I could help you with that."
- "That's what I thought. I mean I've got the sex and violence sorted out in my mind. I just need to give the piece some intellectual heft with a couple of lengthy erudite monologues. Give it some gravitas and intellectual justification."
- "So, are you looking to write a best seller or produce art?"
- "Ideally both."
- "I am not sure that's possible. You better decide what kind of book you want to write."

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Lawrence nodded but already knew what he wanted. He wanted fame, wealth and the adulation, particularly of the female variety. The glory of artistic merit would be a bonus.

- "Are there any technical tips you can suggest now you have read the first fifty pages?"
- "I thought it was a bit slow at the start. There was a lack of dialogue," replied Flynn.
- "Yes, that was deliberate. I am attempting to ape *Zola's* physically descriptive style by setting the scene at the start."

- "The trouble is that we are not in the *nineteenth century* any longer."
- "Maybe you should tell the landlady that. The standard of cleanliness in here leaves a lot to be desired."

Flynn ignored Lawrence's attempt at humour.

- "What I am saying is that people don't have the patience they used to. Will your readership stay with you? It's not exactly a page turner."
- "It's a slow burner. The action heats up later."
- "But who are your readership?"
- "People who like truthful writing."
- "The middle classes who you pillory in your book? - they are the ones who buy books."
- "Who cares about the public? We need to see the world as it is."

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- "So you think Broughton Park is the *Sodom and Gomorrah* that you depict?"
- "I want to expose the fake rectitude of the *bourgeoisie*. Broughton Park is a typical example of that hypocrisy."
- "You may be accused of being *anti-Semitic*."
- "I am part Jewish myself," declared Lawrence.
- "Nevertheless, I don't think a publisher would touch it."

- "Maybe, but it's a book I feel that I have to write."

Flynn stroked his chin and screwed up his features in concentration before speaking.

- "Good luck to you then young man. You'll have to let me have the book in its entirety after the first draft is completed."
- "Your name is already on it."

Flynn raised his glass to his lips and took a long swig of the amber ale.

- "You know, I used to be neighbours with an Irish woman called Peggy. She worked in the Jewish community as a cleaning lady," said Flynn.

- "Really? That's a coincidence," replied Lawrence.
- "Yes, it is."
- "Did she tell you anything interesting?"
- "Aye she did. Used to go on about her employer. Apparently the old girl she worked for was a bit of a man-eater."
- "Like the old widow in my book?"
- "Exactly. The ageing *femme fatale* type."

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- "You see. My novel isn't that far-fetched."
- "I know. Sometimes it's the religious ones that you have to watch."

- "Like I said, they are hypocrites the lot of them. I personally never bought into that whole religious conceit."
- "For some it gives meaning to their lives."
- "Searching for truth is my meaning."
- "The truth can be elusive."
- "That doesn't mean we should deceive ourselves," said Lawrence.

The two men smiled ruefully at each other.

- "I might have to base a character on you, Flynn."
- "You will have to get to know me first."
- "Will that take long?"
- "Well, I'm a man of many parts. My round I think."
- "You are easy to read when it comes to beer."
- "It must be the Irish in me. We have drink and the Welsh have sex."
- "What do the English have?"
- "I'm still trying to fathom that one out. Perhaps a work ethic and a sense of duty?"
- "In that case I don't feel very English."
- "You are not your typical Brit, Lawrence. Maybe it's the Jewish in you?"
- "The Jews don't drink."

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- "Don't kid yourself."

- "My parents both drank but they weren't the strictly religious types."
- "I know that your father drank. I bought him a large scotch when he got me off with a slap on the wrist that time. I think that he was a religious man."
- "If he was then I didn't see much evidence of it."
- "Don't be so quick to judge others. It's a fault of the young to be overly critical. Just because he didn't go the *synagogue* every Saturday didn't make him an atheist."
- "I just don't think he was. He didn't care about others. How can you be religious if all you care about is your career?"
- "Aren't you obsessed by this novel?"
- "*Touche*, you old bastard."
- "And the rest of the day to yourself."

With that Flynn rose and walked over to the bar. Despite the potentially dangerous nature of the conversation Lawrence was enjoying Flynn's company and the convivial setting. The remainder of the day was spent listening to the Irish orator who regaled the young man with anecdotes from his colourful life. He had been a professional boxer with an impressive record until an eye injury had curtailed his career prematurely. Married twice with half a dozen children he had also been a reasonably successful business man until an unscrupulous accountant had stolen all his

money. Divorce, gambling addiction and alcoholism had characterised his decline and

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yet Flynn was still highly regarded and a popular man in *Prestwich Village*. Flynn was a likeable rogue and a bit of a character; very well read and possessed of an artistic soul. He would have given you half of all his money if he had had any money to give.

Lawrence knew that he had to be more careful. Apart from his attention seeking antics in *The Donkey* he had shown Flynn the first pages of his novel and discussed its outline. Now it transpired that Flynn knew a Peggy. It had to be the same Peggy. If those two ever got together the truth might be revealed. There had also been the hushed albeit heated argument with Judith in the bedroom which had been reckless. He had forced her on to the bed and tried to take her there and then in front of the old lady. But Judith had fought him off and called him a murdering bastard. Mrs Glynn had looked on with the inscrutability of a lifeless doll; the old woman suffering in silence unable to point the finger at the evil pair. Of course Lawrence would include all this in his novel -it was too dramatic not to use. But he still worried about Flynn and whether he should show him the finished book.

Lawrence knew that he could not break free from Judith and was now seemingly bound to Flynn in the same

irrational way. His love for Judith was turning to hatred and yet he continued to visit *The Grange* every Thursday night. The rest of the week he worked on his tale of treachery or sat next to Flynn in *The Donkey*. Meanwhile Mrs Glynn's initial happiness at being cared for by her daughter had turned to a living nightmare as she was forced to listen to the details of her son's

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murder over and over again. Every Thursday evening as she lay lifelessly on the bed Lawrence and Judith would repeat their accusations and counter accusations. It was as if their arguments and evidence had been prepared; prosecution and defence engaged in a court room battle while the oblivious guests exchanged pleasantries next door and the old lady heard in silent judgement. The couple's love had turned into a mutual dread of being in each other's company and yet they continued to torture each other unaware of the matriarch's agony.

Lawrence and Judith both knew that their life could be quiet and peaceful if they parted but they longed to destroy each other. They were angry that the crime had forever ruined their lives.

- "You were the one that killed Neville!"
- "But you drove me to murder! You were not thinking of Neville when we screwed each others' brains out in the spare room."

All the time Mrs Glynn, the silent impotent witness, burned inside with feelings of horror and thoughts of revenge. She wondered what she had done to suffer such an agonizing fate.

Lawrence suffered his own torments as once again his creative powers waned. In his search for literary perfection he was making no progress with the novel. The effort was beginning to make him physically ill. One day he had spent eight hours trying to perfect the

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opening sentence in *Chapter One* which he had re-read with contempt on waking that morning. Noting his *protege's* declining health Flynn had suggested compromise.

- "There's no such thing as the perfect novel, young fella'."
- "I won't settle for second best," replied Lawrence.
- "You have to know when to let go."
- "I can't do it. It's like an obsession, this quest for truth and authenticity."
- "But you will never finish it at this rate. You have a life to lead."
- "It's my reason for living."

- "You need to lighten up son. Get drunk. Get laid. Anything!"
- "I will but I need to finish this thing first."
- "You know it may all be for nothing. For a man who doesn't believe in the afterlife what makes you think that your book will be remembered after you've departed this mortal coil?"
- "Your right. That's the risk but don't you see that's why I have to get it right."
- "You'll make yourself ill son. Nobody cares. Let me get you another pint."

Lawrence grunted in assent and sank into a deep contemplative mood. He was more convinced than ever that his work was important. It was a question of producing something of lasting value and his only worthwhile reason for living. Yet he doubted his ability to complete the book, feeling held back by the obvious limitations of his own

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brain. At times the scale of the artistic enterprise he had set himself seemed way beyond his abilities. Lawrence couldn't keep the shape of the novel in his mind at any one instant. His memory lacked the necessary power and an underdeveloped critical faculty meant that he didn't know which bits were good and which terrible. It tortured him to think that he was keeping and building on the bad writing while

discarding the good prose. Thankfully he could turn to Flynn for advice but he was not his only reader and critic. One Thursday nights when Judith left him alone with Mrs Glynn for a few moments, he had started to read the old woman extracts from his novel.

It was summer again and the sparrows and finches were busy tweeting away in the hedgerows that surrounded *The Grange*. Mrs Glynn was now more visible in the car park; the good weather an opportunity to show off a collection of maddeningly sexy outfits. Tight pencil skirts, classy sling back shoes, sheer silk blouses and tight sweaters that left little to the imagination were all on display. Oliver still had flashbacks of the widow in lingerie but these summer outfits were just as arousing. The world was in full bloom and the queen bee was the focal point in the centre of such abundant fecundity. Oliver had to open the window of his study but kept the net curtains drawn, the fine material gently billowing in the breeze as he sat hunched at his desk. At least Mrs Glynn wasn't the central sexual figure in his story anymore, not that anyone was after the dampening effect of

Neville's murder. The whole tone of the tale had changed and become much more philosophical which in some ways was a relief. The preceding chapter was the closest to Oliver's heart. It brought back memories of his student days in Norwich, of sitting in pubs on the *Unthank Road* and talking about writing with anyone who would care to listen. There had been one person who had given him the time of day and shared his artistic interests. Flynn came from a wealthy Irish family and had studied Theology at *Trinity College Dublin*. A winner of the *Mullins Exhibitioner Prize* for his provocative essay entitled, *The Priesthood and Original Sin*, Flynn had turned his back on religion at an early age. In many ways Oliver's new friend was a throw back with his scholarly pedigree, old world manners and formal way of speaking. Flynn also looked like he had stepped out of a time machine with the dial set at 1950. He wore corduroy trousers, shiny hand tooled brogues and expensive striped shirts with braces. Invariably he sported a cream mackintosh which had earned him the nickname *Columbo* with the local pub goers, and carried a black men's umbrella.

Post university family contacts had secured Flynn a position on the trading floors of *London's Stock Exchange* where he then proceeded to lose a fortune in short term securities. A brief attempt to revive his career in the world of finance came to an equally disappointing end when his lucrative stay in Hong Kong

was cut short by China regaining control of the colony. With a modest amount of money a disillusioned Flynn decided to turn his back on ambition and the acquisition of wealth. Norwich seemed as good a place as any to hide

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away from life and more importantly avoid one's successful peers who all lived in the capital. Flynn saw in young Oliver the same idealism and unfocused talent that he had once possessed, though he secretly thought his ambitions were doomed. The pair became good friends and met up for long walks around the historic city with its castle and magnificent cathedral. It was an enjoyable way to pass the time before the taverns opened at *11am*.

Chapter 14 - *Impotence*

With nothing better to do Lawrence started to take long walks around Manchester. He would amble into the city past *HMP Strangeways* and *Manchester Cathedral* and head south; Half an hour later dodging students on *Oxford Road* or stepping over beggars near the former *BBC*. Lawrence could walk for miles like this ending up in far flung places like Stockport and Altrincham. It seemed to help his mood which in times of artistic frustration was darkly suicidal. In those bleak moments he was his own biggest critic comparing himself to the lowest of menial labourers. Lawrence had no trade and couldn't even drive a car, making him fit for nothing in a world that was becoming increasingly vocational. There was no room for the talented generalist or rebellious soul who refused to conform. What a fool he had been to think that somehow normal rules did not apply to him, yet it hadn't been totally his fault. The teachers and careers advisors had repeatedly misled

him with the same seductive mantra – “Lawrence Ross, you are the son of a *QC* and far too clever to work with your hands.”

Lawrence was unemployable but he had bigger personal problems. He felt bitter and cheated as a man. Passion and lust had driven him to act but now with a cruel twist of fate he suffered from impotence. His flaccidity went way beyond mere brewer’s droop and for the first time as an adult he felt no desire. Perversely he still loved Judith, at least in an abstract hypothetical sense, but his *libido* was hopelessly moribund. He tried to visual the love of his life lying naked on those

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pristine white sheets but couldn’t summon up the image that had once captivated him. He stared at women in the street, looking for that spark, imagining their naked bodies, but to no avail. Judith had destroyed his lustful urges. Now he could only associate sex with love. It could only ever be Judith and consequently she had ruined him forever. Lawrence was now an emasculated husk of a man no more virile than the pitiful creature he had killed and had regarded with such scorn. Murder had castrated Lawrence and sapped his strength and manhood. All he had left was his story and a dead feeling inside compounded by a sense of dread.

In desperation Lawrence tried pornography; something he hadn't resorted to since adolescence when well thumbed copies of *Playboy* had been passed round the dormitory. The internet was the initial go-to source for his jaded mind. He trawled through sites that ran the gamut from harmless perversions to the frankly bizarre, but got scared after visiting one site dedicated to *The Busty Jewess*. Worryingly Lawrence had been redirected to a bogus looking *FBI* page and was threatened with prosecution if a fine of \$100 wasn't paid immediately. It had been a bluff but the con artists nevertheless managed to freeze his computer. Only after resetting his PC to an earlier settings configuration was his computer usable again, by which time Lawrence had learned his salutary lesson. Thereafter Lawrence avoided sites of a dubious looking provenance but he still persisted in his quest. Luckily he possessed a single black and white passport photograph of Judith which she had given him at the start of their affair. By copying and pasting he was able to attach Judith's

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head to a series of nubile body model images on his computer screen. Alas, this creepy manoeuvre didn't have the desired effect. Somehow it seemed reprehensible to abuse Judith's picture in this way. Ashamed of his schoolboy antics he deleted the offending composite pictures. It felt like he had reached a new low but matters were about to get even worse.

Judith had slammed down the phone in anger. She should never have allowed him to draw her into conversation and wouldn't make the same mistake again - the cheek of the man! Lawrence had started off reasonably enough asking about the welfare of *Baby Neville* but then the exchange had taken a sickening turn. He had asked her what she was wearing in a tone that suggested it was the most natural of questions. Judith was annoyed that he could think that she would be turned on by such smutty tactics. It was Thursday night again and her guests would soon be arriving. She would avoid Lawrence that evening and make sure he didn't get her alone in the master bedroom with mother. She now wondered what she had she ever seen in the man. Neville was a saint in comparison to this heavy breathing nemesis. Judith resolved that she would ask Peggy to stay on an extra few hours that evening and help her see to Mrs Glynn's nappy change. That way she could keep Lawrence at bay.

In contrast Lawrence thought that Judith had over reacted by slamming the phone down on him earlier in the day. He could tell that she was still angry by the way she had scrupulously ignored him all night and not asked for his assistance with Mrs Glynn. At least he

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was being distracted by the conversation around the card table, which unusually for Thursday nights was

flowing and in serious danger of becoming interesting. Both Horowitz and Mrs Burger were keen to engage him in discourse which Lawrence took as a sign of their nervousness. He had caught Horowitz groping Mrs Burger in the kitchen when he had gone to return his empty cup and saucer. What had struck him as shocking was not so much the infidelity as the resigned look on Mrs Burger's face like that of a *marmoset* being eaten alive by a carnivorous chimp. She was stood impassively with her back to the sink, apparently resigned to her fate, as Horowitz groped her body and buried his face in her ample matronly bosom. On being discovered the ex-policeman had quickly ceased his molestation and hurriedly brushed his way past Lawrence. Though red faced and embarrassed he hadn't attempted to offer an explanation. But it was the way Mrs Burger had straightened her dishevelled blouse and simply smiled that had profoundly impacted on Lawrence. With her tacit feminine wisdom she seemed to be saying that all men were the same and no better than greedy little boys.

Mrs Burger and Horowitz! For God's sake, they are all at it, thought Lawrence. What about Mr Burger and Mrs Horowitz? The beanpole and the stick insect would be a match made in heaven. At that moment even the unlikeliest of affairs seemed possible and Lawrence regarded them all hypocrites. Then to cap it all and add

to his irritation Horowitz started banging on about *President Trump* and *Brexit* in typical bombastic style.

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- "What do you make of *Trump*," Lawrence?"
- "I don't think much of his haircut."
- "Yes, I know what you mean," replied Horowitz, suddenly aware of his own comb-over which had the texture and look of a blow dried scouring pad. "I was thinking more of his policies."
- "Well, he says that he is going to be tough on Moslems and build a wall the length of the US-Mexican border. I think that was just pre-election rhetoric."
- "I hope not. *The Free-World* needs a strong leader to stand up to terrorists and get a handle on mass migration. It will be the ruination of us all if he doesn't."
- "Not all migrants are terrorists."
- "Of course you are right about that, Lawrence, but how are we to know who are genuine refugees and who are the bombers and the assassins without more stringent border controls? It's a question of national security."
- "But *Trump* was talking about a complete ban on all Muslims entering *The United States*. Are you advocating such a policy?"
- "Yes, I am," replied Horowitz. "And I would close our borders in the same way while I was at it."

- "The Jewish people sought refuge in this country not so long ago. Britain is a country built on immigration."
- "I agree but it has to be strictly controlled," said Horowitz. "When we came here we had money and wanted to build a future."

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- "I agree with Frank," interjected Mrs Burger.

They seem to be sharing everything these days including opinions, thought Lawrence.

- "So you are both *UKIP* voters then?" asked Lawrence.
- "Naturally I have always been a *Conservative* but if they, the government, try and backslide on the *Brexit* vote and ignore the clear will of the British electorate then I may well be forced to vote for *UKIP*, yes," replied Horowitz.
- "That's my position as well," said Mrs Burger. "What alternative is there? *Labour* are unelectable with that dreamer *Corbyn* at the helm talking about getting rid of our nuclear deterrent and having an open door policy on immigration."
- "Well said, Naomi," added Horowitz.

Naomi Burger! , noted an amused Lawrence.

- Moreover *Labour* is now an *anti-Semitic* party in many urban parts of the country. In its quest for votes *Labour* has sold its soul to vested sectarian interests. I will state it no more strongly than that," continued Horowitz, now warming to his task.
- "You are saying that radical Moslems have high-jacked the *Labour Party*?"
- "Okay, now that you have forced my hand I will admit that I am saying exactly that," replied Horowitz.

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- "I think the largely right wing media exaggerates the problem of electoral fraud and patronage in Muslim communities," said Lawrence. "The kind of populism that you are advocating was how *Hitler* started."
- "Ridiculous!" exclaimed Horowitz. "There is no comparison between the antecedents of *The Third Reich* and what is going on in the *UK* and the *US* today."
- "Perhaps not, but your attitude to immigrants sounds uncharitable," interjected Judith.
- "I agree," added Lawrence.

The former lovers looked each other in the eyes. It was the first time that they had agreed on anything for a very long time. However, Lawrence's new found liberal

opinions had not convinced Judith. It wasn't that long ago that he had showed a cruel indifference to the plight of the homeless likening them to a bunch of crafty scroungers. He was just trying to worm his way back into her affections by pretending to be a caring soul, she thought. Besides, she had enough on her plate without worrying about a calculating bastard like Lawrence.

Two years thus passed with Lawrence only attending *The Grange* on Thursday nights. The memory of their passion and the murder began to fade with the distraction of day to day practicalities. Even with Peggy and Bridie on the team the care of Mrs Glynn and *Baby Neville* was a thankless job. Mrs Glynn couldn't do anything for herself and *Baby Neville* was developing into a needy problem child constantly

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greedy for her milk, even though he had been weaned and was now accustomed to solid foods. Early on he had been diagnosed as autistic with *hyper active attention deficit disorder*. Moreover his appearance was becoming increasingly grotesque with the growth of an overly large head that lolled listlessly on top of an emaciated puny body. It was ironic that Baby Neville had physically taken after his namesake rather than his handsome biological father. Judith was convinced that the baby's defects and Mrs Glynn's infirmity were a punishment from God. She wished that the baby had

never been born seeing in *Baby Neville's* face the murderous genes of his father. The infant was a living reproof of her feminine weakness and her need for the physical love that had led to his conception.

Judith began to rewrite the past and with it her memory of Neville. Her deceased husband became a reinvented saint; forgotten his indifference and cruel disregarding selfishness. Now he was recalled with fondness, an innocent victim of her former lover's twisted and dastardly scheme. She felt deep remorse for the sin of adultery and sought redemption. Thus her life was now mapped out and she knew what to do with her remaining time in order to atone for her feelings of blame. It consisted of caring for her mother and son and doing good works wherever she could. One day a week Judith left Peggy in charge at *The Grange* and helped out at a soup kitchen for the homeless near the *Harp Brewery* in *Hulme*. It was called *My Brother's Keeper*. The nuns who ran the drop-in centre were only too willing to accept her offer of assistance, religious difference being no bar. It

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gave her a sense of satisfaction to feed the poor and she took solace from performing the *Lord's* work.

Peggy had suspected Lawrence and Judith's romantic entanglement for some time. There was Judith's sexy underwear which had first aroused her suspicions and

frankly she had never thought Neville capable of fathering a child. She just knew Judith had taken a lover; her feminine intuition had convinced her and Peggy couldn't think who else it could be apart from Lawrence. Finally she got the proof that she needed to confirm her theory. Peggy had caught Lawrence arguing angrily with Judith in the master bedroom one Thursday evening. They had quickly shut up and tried to brush it off as a trivial matter with Judith putting the argument down to a disagreement over Mrs Glynn's care, but Peggy knew better. The violence of the row was so at odds with their usual respectable behaviour in front of the Horowitzs and the Burgers. Peggy knew from her personal experience of married life that such emotion seldom erupted between mere friends. The Irish woman's hypothesis about Lawrence and Judith made sense. After all, Lawrence was a big strapping fellow with a fine pair of shoulders on him. He was just the sort of chap who would take a young woman's fancy. If she was twenty years younger she wouldn't mind getting the big bugger in the sack herself. Peggy chuckled at the thought but putting joking aside shrewdly considered the potential usefulness of this latest intelligence.

She would keep the information to herself for now even though she was dying to run the story by her pal and sidekick, Bridie. One day it

may prove handy and give her leverage over her employer, but increasingly Peggy had grown to like and respect her mistress. She didn't blame the young woman for having cheated on her dry stick of a late husband. For all Peggy's certainty that Judith and Lawrence had been lovers it never crossed her mind for a moment that Neville had been murdered.

The latest violent row with Lawrence had made up Judith's mind. To complicate matters Peggy had walked in on the argument and the Irish woman was no fool. It was a good job she hadn't barged in a few moments earlier when the insults had been flying thick and fast. Only the mute invalid Mrs Glynn had witnessed that hurtful exchange now replayed for the reader's elucidation.

- "Christ you look haggard," had begun Lawrence.

- "You're no oil painting yourself. Unless that's an oil painting of an old drunk," had replied Judith. "Look at the state of your beer gut."

She had a point with that comment, conceded Lawrence to himself. He had been overdoing the ale and the fast food. These days he couldn't remember what it felt like not having a hangover in the mornings. He had decided that attack was the best form of defence and continued with his tirade of abuse.

- "Once I would have died for a night in your arms. Now you look like a drudge."

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- "You want to try looking after an invalid old lady and your challenging son."

- "He's not my son. He can't be. Only Neville could have fathered such a specimen."

- "He's definitely your son. We are both being punished for what we did."

All this time Mrs Glynn had laid lifelessly on the bed unable to move or scream in outrage. Two small tears had welled up in her bloodshot eyes. That reprehensible fat bastard and his whore killed my boy, she silently cursed.

- "You know that I don't believe in all that rubbish. Nor do you if the truth be known. Look at you all dressed up in black playing the grieving widow. What a performance. Bravo!"

- "To think that I loved you once. You selfish sponging brute. You, a man who only ever cared about his own creature comforts and the selfish satisfaction of your carnal desires."

- "I don't remember you complaining at the time, you fraud."

- "I don't want to see you anymore. Not in this house."
- "Don't worry I won't be coming again. I only did it out of habit and to keep alive the possibility that one day we might be together as we planned but now I see that pipe-dream for what it really is."
- "I'll tell our friends that you are putting the finishing touches to your novel. That's a laugh."

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- "Do what you like. As it happens my novel is taking shape now that I don't have to satisfy your lustful desires or have you forgotten that person."
- "Oh shut up and go to the pub. I'm sure there are plenty of sympathetic sets of ears down there for the price of a drink."
- "Whore!"
- "Swine!"

With the final expletive Peggy had walked into the room. Her arrival signalled the end of the wounding exchange and the last evening that Lawrence would ever spend in *The Grange*.

Oliver had to concede the shamelessly autobiographical content of the preceding chapter. Like the novel's *anti-hero* Lawrence he too now spent hours wandering the

city reeling from inn to inn. At least, acknowledged a grateful Oliver, Manchester was pedestrian friendly and being so small was easy to cover in a day, making it ideal for extended pub crawls. Oliver justified to himself that it was a good idea to be acquainted with the surrounding area and get a rooted sense of the local geography. The Prestwich and Broughton Park neighbourhood reminded him of Judith and *The Grange* and he needed to get away from such troubling mental associations. Moreover, he was no longer welcome at *Cafe Ola* having called Brian and Rodger a pair of raving old queens while heavily under the influence. He regretted upsetting his neighbours who had only ever shown him kindness. Oliver didn't have a local pub or any friends for

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that matter. Occasionally a fellow alcoholic would give him a nod of recognition across a crowded bar but that was about the extent of his daily human interactions. If only Flynn were still alive and living in Manchester. At least then he would have someone intelligent to talk to.

Oliver's life was only made bearable by the occasional little victory. Unbelievably he had found a fairly recent image of Mrs Glynn online. The digital picture showed the widow attending a social function at *Manchester Town Hall* with various dignitaries posing for the cameraman. The image was clear but her body was

frustratingly cut off from the waist down by the framing of the photograph. Mrs Glynn standing out in the crowd was smiling confidently and looked beautiful. Oliver had the picture printed and enlarged at a specialist printing shop on the other side of Manchester. It was an innocent enough photograph and could be explained away easily enough but Oliver didn't want to run the risk of someone recognizing the widow. The framed image which had been cropped, to show only Mrs Glynn and the arms of the people next to her, took pride of place on Oliver's desk next to the ever present lap top.

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Chapter 15 - *Redemption*

The rain hammered relentlessly against the windows of *The Grange* throughout the winter months.

Nevertheless Judith felt compelled to venture out into the dark unwelcoming city. Mrs Glynn's malevolent accusing eyes were now too much to bear. Whenever the two women were in the same room together the power of the old woman's hatred was oppressive. It had become virtually impossible to be in the matriarch's

presence let alone tend to her physical needs. Peggy and Bridie were delegated that responsibility while Judith tried as best as she could to look after the diabolical child. In Judith's mind *Baby Neville* was the spawn of an incubus; the infant's deformity and mental retardation the marks of *Cain*. The ugly little boy screamed for his mother's milk and attention hurling bottles, biting, punching and gouging ensued if his needs were not immediately satisfied.

At breaking point Judith considered having the child placed in a special orphanage facility where they could cope with the pocket-sized brute. She felt guilty for even considering that possibility but saw no alternative. Lawrence had shown no interest in his son even going as far as to deny paternity. At least if the child was suitably placed he would get the care, attention and maybe even love that she was unable to provide. Moreover, with Mrs Glynn receiving round the clock care from Peggy and Bridie she would be free to help the unfortunate in the wider community. Judith's short time volunteering at the soup kitchen had shown her that there was no shortage of deserving cases that would benefit from her help. As far

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as Mrs Glynn and *Baby Neville* were concerned there was nothing that she could do for them. Within a couple of months *Baby Neville* was packed off to a special

school that specialized in bespoke care for problem children. Judith had cried in the spare bedroom as they took the shrieking boy away under cover of darkness. This singular child soon attracted the wider attention of the psychiatric world and became a famous subject of study. It was unheard of for such a young boy to present with the full blown symptoms of *sociopathic personality disorder*. No one on the staff had ever encountered anyone quite as violent and manipulative as this dark haired imp. Meanwhile Peggy and Bride continued to care for the old lady who stubbornly held on to life.

Judith volunteered at the soup run, *My Brother's Keeper*, two lunchtimes a week. On other week days she would patrol the streets of Manchester and dispense food and clothing to the destitute. Judith didn't give away money as she knew that got spent on drink and drugs but she would go into *Greggs's* pie shop on *Cross Street* most days and buy up enough pastries and sandwiches to feed a small army. Always reliable and on time she handed out the tasty comestibles from a bench in *Piccadilly Gardens*. She became well known in the city by the street people who regarded her as a kind-hearted eccentric figure.

Judith hid her attractiveness under layers of bulky dark clothing; long black pleated skirts, thick granny tights and huge shapeless overcoats. She wore no make-up and her hair was scraped back into a severe

bun which was usually hidden under a woolly hat that looked like an old tea-cosy. Judith could quite easily have been mistaken for a bag-lady herself. In terms of appearance she was the same woman who had sat in the window for ten years, before Lawrence and love, only now she possessed more self confidence and determination. She looked older and a lot wiser.

Lawrence's descent into an alcohol fuelled oblivion continued inexorably over the weeks and months following his split with Judith and his forced exile from *The Grange*. Before his premature death he would seek out the company of Flynn in *The Donkey*. One day merged into another and time seemed to speed up; his life frittering away in a fog of intoxication. The conversation would invariably start the same way each morning after they had been served their opening pint and were comfortably seated in the corner by the juke box.

- "How's the novel going young fella'?"

For a while now Lawrence had been aware of the pub gossip and that he was something of a running joke with the regulars. He knew that he would never be totally accepted in a place like *The Donkey* given his middle class bearing and stated aspiration to write a novel. "Who did he think he was?" they muttered. Flynn alone gave him the time of day.

- "I'm on page one hundred and seventy three. Sixty seven thousand words so far," replied Lawrence.
- "It sounds like a labour of love."

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- "That's one way of putting it. I don't know how I'm going to end the story."
- "Do the murderers get away with their crime?"
- "That's the point. I don't know."
- "Nobody likes the bad guys getting away with murder."

By this time Flynn was starting to repeat himself. The old boy's mind was going.

- "I know, you said. I do know that I am ruling out a joint suicide pact and confession is out of the question. In real life I don't think they would admit to the crime."
- "Maybe, but it would be a terrible guilty burden to bear."
- "I'm not so sure. I think with time people can rewrite their pasts to make their lives more bearable."
- "You mean lose one's memory?"
- "Yes, a sort of repression forcing the painful past into the unconscious."
- "I see where you are going with that one but the past has a way of rearing its ugly head. However

I get the point that burying old failures can give one hope. Perhaps God has taken the twice bitten apple from your fictitious murders and healed it with his hands, only to hang it back on the tree and say, try again!"

- "Thanks for the free consultation and theology *Dr Flynn.*"

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- "Not a problem my young friend. While we are at it you might as well tell me about your childhood," smiled Flynn with a devilish twinkle in his eye.
- "I don't mind though it's not that interesting."
- "Let me be the judge."
- "Well, my father was a high achieving barrister who worked mainly in *Manchester's Crown Court.*"
- "What was his name?"
- "Charles Ross."
- "I remember him. He was a brilliant man."
- "How do you know?"
- "He once represented me in court and got me off with a slapped wrist. I was up before the beak for a punch-up in a pub on *Stockport Road*. I'll tell you all about it another time but please continue with the story of your early years."

- "My father was a functioning alcoholic as was my mother. Outside of the home no one ever suspected either of being less than perfect."
- "But you were exposed to the arguments."
- "Yes, most nights they would fight until mother finally had enough and left us. She ended up re-marrying some minor Italian aristocrat and spent her final years living in Florence."
- "So after your mother left what happened then?"
- "Father packed me off to boarding school. We never saw eye to eye after that."

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Flynn took a sip of beer while gesturing with a wave of his hand for Lawrence to continue with his yarn.

- "Well, there's not much more to say. I hated school and coped by reading a lot and writing fantasy adventure stories. When I came into some trust money at eighteen I went off to university."
- "And you studied law?"
- "How did you know?"
- "Sons try to please fathers. At least at first."
- "You are very perceptive."
- "It has been said."
- "So I read English and then went on to do a *Masters in Creative Writing*."

- "Impressive but can you write?"
- "I don't know. Soon you will be the judge."
- "You might not like what I will have to say. I won't pull my punches if it's crap."
- "I'd expect nothing less from you, Flynn."
- "You know you're not that bad for a middle class asshole."
- "And you're okay for an Irish *piss artist*."
- "I'll drink to that young fella'."
- "I thought you might."

The two men raised and chinked glasses causing a comment from the bar.

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- "You two will be getting married soon," said a rough looking type who had overheard the conversation between Flynn and Lawrence. The young man was offended but Flynn took the heat out of the situation.
- "Aye, we are off to *Gretna Green* tonight but you are not invited."

Unable to think of a witty rejoinder the hard man simply shrugged his shoulders and turned back to face the bar. One or two of the regulars laughed. They remembered how handy Flynn had been in his prime. They still talked about the time he had punched one infamous bully

clean across the tap room of *The Donkey*. Old drunk as he was now Flynn still commanded some respect in this part of town. Besides Flynn knew all the old boxers from Manchester and one phone call would bring the cavalry running to his assistance not that he would ever do that. Flynn was his own man and Lawrence loved him for that.

- "So your illustrious father left you a few quid?" asked Flynn.
- "Yes, but my inheritance is being whittled down."
- "What about getting a job?"
- "I have no skills, just a lot of useless education. Does talking to you every day count as toil?"
- "To some it might."
- "How do you make ends meet, if you don't mind me asking?" enquired Lawrence.

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- "The system wrote me off years ago. I am not mentally fit for work," said Flynn, tapping the side of his head with the knuckles of his right hand."
- "So you get state benefits for that?"
- "Aye, *Disability Benefit* for life."
- "For life?"

- "Aye, for life. The last time a psychiatrist tried to analyse me he ended up giving me *carte blanche*: a free pass."
- "Did you convince him that you were mad?"
- "Mad as a hatter."
- "How did you manage that?"
- "I just told him I was a Russian spy working for the *Kremlin* and that my Prestwich barfly persona was merely a ruse to throw *M15* off the scent."
- "That would do it."
- "It did in my case," laughed Flynn.

Lawrence doubted that he would be able to get away with such an outrageous scam. He was certain that he would end up giving the game away by not being able to keep a straight face. Yet he had deceived everyone bar Judith when it came to murder. Admittedly high stakes tended to focus the mind but could he ever play the deranged lunatic well enough to fool the authorities. Keeping one's mouth shut and not contradicting the consensus was easier than adopting a completely fake persona and making it look genuine. Lawrence doubted that he could match Flynn's talent for deception and coolness under the pressure of an interview or interrogation.

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Nevertheless it would be an interesting exercise to feign mental illness and try and mimic the symptoms of

schizophrenia. If Judith ever informed the police of his crime then playing the insanity card might be his best bet. Lawrence would store away Flynn's example for future reference. Of course he hoped such desperate tactics would never be needed. He was confident that Judith saw the danger of turning him in to the police and recognised that they both had everything to lose in the event of a confession. Having a conscience and owning up to their guilt was a self-indulgent luxury that neither of them could afford.

After six months Judith became an indispensable part of the team at *My Brother's Keeper*. Each day she would arrive at the drop-in centre promptly at 9am and assist in the preparation of soup and sandwiches. There was also the job of sorting donated clothing and the daily cleaning of both the male and female shower areas. Judith did more than her fair share of the work always performing these menial tasks with great energy and an infectious enthusiasm. The doors were opened to the public at 11am so there was always quite a bit to get done in this early part of the morning. With five minutes to go the staff would all join hands and say a little prayer. Usually the words were spoken by one of the nuns or the veteran helpers. Judith's religion was different in some of its core beliefs but she had been welcomed into the flock. She reasoned that all the major faiths believed in the one true God which was the

important point. Prayer, showing one's love and humility to the *Creator*, and living a virtuous

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life were practices common to all of the main religions. Judith prayed for *Baby Neville* and Mrs Glynn. She hoped that her son was getting the best of care and that the old lady would soon pass away peacefully. She also prayed for her real mother who she had never known in any meaningful sense having been taken away when Judith was a small child. Lawrence did not enter her thoughts at such times, not even for a moment. Her former lover was an incorrigible rogue well beyond any form of redemption. Judith's prayers would be wasted on Lawrence.

Judith soon got to know the regular users of the drop-in centre. The majority were single men who had fallen on hard times though increasingly young women were starting to take advantage of a free shower and hot meal. The over-forties tended to be alcoholics while the younger men and women were the victims of drug addiction; mainly *heroin* or *crack cocaine*. The rest were made up of the mentally ill and people simply struggling to make ends meet living on benefits. All of the patrons of *My Brother's Keeper* were poor and lived a day to day existence with no expectations and little hope of escape from their brutish lives. Most looked undernourished and scruffy with poor teeth and

hunched postures almost as if they were apologizing to the world for their uninvited presence. It was a surprise when a tall looking young man of about thirty started to use the centre. After a shower and a clean set of clothes he looked very handsome and singularly out of place in a soup kitchen environment. Judith saw in him the wastage of a man and learned through one of the nuns that his name was Jonathan Cunningham. He was known to

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the sisters as every couple of years he turned up at *My Brother's Keeper* dirty and hungry. It was a mystery where he got to in between times. Over the coming days Judith managed to engage him in conversation without making it look obvious that she found him attractive. The ice was broken when she had asked Jonathan if he wanted another cup of tea.

- "Only if you join me," had been his reply.

And that was how it started.

Oliver still couldn't get Mrs Glynn out of his mind. It was winter and doubly frustrating that on those rare occasions when she did venture out from *The Grange* the widow would be wrapped up in overcoats, hats and scarves. He needed to see Mrs Glynn naked but didn't have the courage to even talk with the woman let alone

anything more intimate. A shy boy who grew into an even more introverted adult Oliver clammed up in the presence of females especially if he found them desirable. The fat nurse had put him off approaching women ever again. He knew that he shouldn't have followed her across the park after work but it had just happened. All he had wanted to do was to talk, but when he came up behind she panicked and screamed. The matter had been reported the next day and he had been sacked for sexual harassment. No further action had been taken save for a police caution but his name was damagingly placed on the *Sex Offenders Register*. Now Oliver couldn't work in hospitals, schools or

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any job that needed a criminal records check. It was a good job he had his own savings to fall back on.

If only Oliver could spy on Mrs Glynn in her flat. Every time he returned to *The Grange* he looked hopefully in the direction of the French windows but she was never there. That time when she had stood provocatively in her black underwear had been a one off. Oliver even began to think that he may have imagined the whole episode, yet it was all he had to cling on to apart from her cherished photograph on his desk. Annoyingly the bathroom and toilet windows at the rear of the building were frosted and impossible to see through. The only glimpses of Mrs Glynn consisted of her getting in and

out of the silver *Mark 2 Jaguar*. He longed for summer, spring even, when the widow would wear less clothing and the sight of her magnificent body would once more feed his obsession.

Oliver knew that women were not just sex objects, that there were plenty of good women out there trying to go about their business as intelligent sensitive human beings. On his walks around Manchester he had discovered a couple of drop-in centres where saintly volunteers devoted their time and energy to feeding and helping the homeless. These *angels of mercy* acted out of the goodness of their hearts. There were male helpers but usually it was the women who cared enough to turn up day in and day out and give their unconditional love and support. Matron had tended his wounds and offered him words of encouragement at school; her intentions had been purely selfless and noble. Yet Oliver's affection for this

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substitute mother figure had become intertwined with a rapidly flourishing sexual awakening. Thereafter Oliver found it impossible to not lust after women of a certain age, especially if they were unobtainable through marriage or widowhood. He hadn't really fancied the fat nurse but she had reminded him of matron.

Chapter 16 - *The Fall*

Lawrence stared gloomily into the bottom of his dirty looking glass. Two weeks had elapsed since Flynn's sudden death. The landlady had found the Irishman slumped unconscious outside *The Donkey* when she had opened on that never to be forgotten morning. Today Lawrence was sat in his late friend and mentor's

favourite old seat. The funeral had been well attended and several mourners were starting to drift into the bar. Lawrence would miss the old reprobate and wondered how he would now finish his novel. Flynn had been an invaluable source of advice and erudite feedback. But who had he been kidding? It had always been a pipedream. The frustrated artist struggling in his garret to produce his masterpiece was such a romantic cliché. He had been living out the fantasy of a deluded fool. Lawrence finished his drink and walked forlornly out of *The Donkey*. "Good bye old friend", he whispered under his breath as he stepped out on to a busy *Bury New Road*.

Lawrence started the long downhill walk into town; his feet swollen by a sudden attack of gout. Limping like a cripple he had to pause every few yards to relieve the throbbing pain, some fleeting respite from this most vindictive of ailments. On his right beyond the constant stream of traffic he noticed the burned out gymnasium that was still smouldering in the rain. An acrid smell of burned rubber tainted the air and the skeleton of a multi-gym could just about be seen amongst the pile of black debris. The local consensus was that the old building had been torched for the insurance money.

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Lawrence studied the charred remains and considered the implications of such blatant arson. Now the fitness

freaks and muscle boys would have to go elsewhere in order to affirm their manhood while a reimbursed pyromaniac sunbathed on the *Costa del Sol* and toasted their good health. As he considered the futility of the whole body beautiful pursuit and the ruthlessness of organised crime Lawrence caught sight of his reflection in the shop window of the Jewish opticians. At first Lawrence didn't recognize the huge shambolic figure looking back at him. Not that long ago the optician's dark middle aged secretary with the sexy heavy spectacles would have returned his gaze with a hint of promise but not now. The bigger he got the more invisible he became and the less she noticed Lawrence's daily passing. These days he didn't look as though he had what it took to satisfy a woman. Admittedly Lawrence had always been a big man who loved his food and drink but most of the muscle had turned to fat. With the best will in the world he had to concede that matters had got completely out of hand, that he had let himself go. There was a pressing need to lose poundage but he lacked the motivation to kick start his rehabilitation. Now he seriously doubted if he would ever get back into anything resembling decent shape. Maybe there had always been a fat man inside Lawrence trying to get out. Certainly Lawrence now lived to eat rather than *vice versa*; food was a reassuring source of comfort and it soaked up the juice. Disillusioned with women he had waved vanity goodbye and given up caring about his looks. The only way he

could now face life and get through the day was with a drink in him. Yet he could only ingest

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large quantities of alcohol with a gut full of stodgy food. Lawrence's weight had ballooned as a consequence of repeated ten pint sessions and destructive *kebab* binges.

Already sweating after a two hundred yard walk the waist band of his trousers cruelly digging into his stomach, Lawrence turned towards *The Sherwood* for a much needed spot of light refreshment. Out of pure habit and with a last vestige of stubborn optimism he glanced back at the Jewish secretary sat in the optometrist's window. The attractive middle aged woman was completely unaware of Lawrence's existence as she diligently typed away at her desk.

- "It's your loss," shouted Lawrence as he pushed his way into the pub.

Lawrence only stayed in *The Sherwood* for two pints of bitter and a couple of whisky chasers. The atmosphere was dead; just two old codgers sipping halves of best in the corner of the room, and a manic depressive drudge dejectedly wiping bottles behind the bar. Lawrence's attempt to lift the mood with his favourite *George Formby* impression fell on deaf ears. The morose barmaid gave him a look of withering contempt and the

pensioners complained about the racket. Philosophically he poured the dregs of his second pint into his shot glass and swilled the contents. Defiantly scanning the room one last time he drained the diluted mix before making his exit. There were no cheery farewells as he pushed against the stiff door and resumed his odyssey into Manchester.

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A hundred yards further on he felt the pressing need to stop for another rest break. His boot was tightening and his bladder nagging due to an enlarged prostate. So much for men maturing like fine red wine, thought Lawrence. *The Red Lion* was the last watering hole in the village and it turned out to be as lifeless as *The Sherwood*. At times like this Lawrence wondered how these pubs made enough money to stay open. In the face of supermarket competition and public apathy it amazed him that obsolete fat landlords stubbornly continued to open their doors. Maybe the bastards just liked to moan:

- "The game's not what it used to be. I'm barely making a living. Don't know how I can go on running at a loss. The weekends are just about keeping me afloat. If it wasn't for the money I make on the food I would be on the streets. This country has gone to the dogs. Too many bloody immigrants etc etc."

Depressingly the only customers in *The Red Lion* were three diehard pensioners and a disabled alcoholic sat slumped in a motorised wheelchair. This cream of Prestwich's finest imbibing talent all shared the same nostalgic vision. To a man they longed for the halcyon days of packed boozers and the pub *crack*, when you could buy knock off meat and have a *sing-song*. They believed the golden times would return if they steadfastly kept their daily vigil imagining scores of drunken revellers carousing the afternoons away through a haze of illegal cigarette smoke. The regulars were dying off with diseased livers and perforated ulcers but the resolute few who remained would never desert their posts. It was a question of loyalty and

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patience; something the fickle younger generation didn't understand with their video games and smart phones.

Flynn's death had accelerated Lawrence's precipitous descent into alcoholism. He now supplemented his daily beer intake with damaging quantities of spirits. Most days he would consume at least two bottles of whisky; a fact confirmed by the empties casually discarded by his bedside or found in his coat pocket. The consequences of murder were destroying Lawrence the man. No matter how hard he tried to forget he was haunted by the recurring image of Neville's deathly visage and the

gravity of what he had done. During the day an attack of guilt could be triggered by the mere sight of a wheelchair on the high street or on a bus. It seemed that the city was hosting the *Para-Olympics* so prevalent were the disabled and the infirm wherever he went, especially in the pubs. Sleep and some form of escape at night were equally impossible without the anaesthetic of strong liquor. He had killed for love and now that woman hated him. The violence of his action had scared her away. Lawrence had been seduced by a dark princess and sacrificed everything in a fit of madness, but it had all been for nothing.

The separation had emphasized to each the difference of the other. Judith had accused him of losing touch with reality, of trying to act out some grand drama like a scene in his novel yet her accusations didn't ring true with Lawrence. He thought that she was less noble than she claimed with her new found religiosity. Judith's self-righteousness annoyed Lawrence which he felt hid her true carnal

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nature. It seemed to him that the false could never find the truth and Lawrence rejected the idea that a person could invent their own subjective truth.

- "You're not the man I thought you were!" her hurtful words still screamed in his head.

Lawrence began to regard the female sex with scorn. He believed that they could justify anything to themselves if it suited their purpose. As Lawrence approached the city centre he noticed the assembled TV crews and their expensive technical paraphernalia. Reporters were speaking to camera and a large crowd was milling around to see what all the fuss was about. He could see the protester sat on the roof of one of the buildings that made up *HMP Strangeways*. The convict was shouting down to the crowd but it was difficult to discern his words above the sound of the traffic. He was waving a makeshift banner. It wasn't the first time that Lawrence had seen roof top demonstrations at this institution - it seemed like an annual event - so he carried on walking. He was unimpressed by the futile protest which would end when the disgruntled inmate got unbearably wet and hungry. Lawrence knew that the conditions inside the prison were grim and had no wish to verify the fact first hand. If he managed to stay out of trouble then that fate would be avoided but he knew that would be difficult given his new social circle. Lawrence listened to the men in pubs who talked casually of their time in the *Big House* and how they had gone for *a lie down*; relaxing breaks ranging from six months to ten years plus. As the son

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of a barrister he doubted whether his stay at this particular *Windsor Hotel* would be a comfortable one.

The threat of incarceration frightened him more than anything in the world.

Lawrence approached the Cathedral and the start of the city proper. Several beggars were gathered near to the big church's back door where alms are dispensed to the destitute and needy each day. Lawrence thought he recognised a figure hurriedly walking away from the small crowd. The grey haired man looked like he was carrying a shopping bag full of free sandwiches and seemed eager to put distance between himself and the church soup kitchen. Maybe he was ashamed of having to resort to such charity, thought Lawrence, but it was something else about this character that struck a chord. It was the shape of the stranger's shoulders and head and the way that he walked that had caught Lawrence's attention but could it really be him? Flynn was dead in the ground and here he was apparently walking around Manchester city centre. It was absurd to think that he may still be alive and Lawrence wondered if he was losing his mind. When a person sees only what he wants to see is that not a form of insanity? Did wish fulfilment trump objective reality? Lawrence felt sick and disorientated. He had always believed in the truth being out there independent of observation but now he was beginning to doubt that fundamental principle which allowed people to function in a complex world.

Lawrence was scared that he was withdrawing into a world of his own making and losing a grip on reality. He had to follow that man

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and face him, to rule out the possibility that Flynn was still alive. If the man wasn't Flynn that at least Lawrence would still have his sanity. Narrowly dodging a tram on *Cross Street* he set off in pursuit of the grey haired man. Up a busy *Market Street* through the scores of shoppers went the mystery man with his distinctive plastic carrier bag. Lawrence was struggling to keep up but maintained his distance at about a hundred yards. The buskers and the street preachers were out in force and provided the soundtrack to the junkies who posed in doorways; rigid statues petrified by *legal highs*. Lawrence got stuck behind an Asian mother with a double width buggy and nearly lost sight of his target. Hustling and bustling as best he could without causing offence he overtook the slowly moving road block and glimpsed a shock of grey hair traversing the concrete of *Piccadilly Gardens*; that post modernist homage to the Parisian urinal.

The Flynn lookalike was climbing the ramp to *Piccadilly Station* and Lawrence was worried he may lose him if the man quickly caught a train. It was a relief when old grey hair slowed and ascended the stairs to the bar that overlooks the station concourse and electronic

timetable screens. Lawrence followed and decided to join him for a drink. The man was sat at a table with a pint and looked like he had been expecting Lawrence.

- "Would you care to sit down young fella?"

It felt uncanny to Lawrence that the stranger sounded just like Flynn, but clearly wasn't the same man. Equally bizarre was how this person had managed to get served so quickly.

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- "If you don't mind," said Lawrence.

Lawrence seated himself directly opposite his new acquaintance. Flynn's reincarnation started the pleasantries.

- "The waiter will be round in a minute. Ah, here he is. Let me get you a drink. What will it be?"
- "A pint of bitter will be fine," said Lawrence to the waiter who promptly headed off in the direction of the bar.

The man took a sip of his beer and studied Lawrence in the same way as Flynn had always done. It was time for Lawrence to ask a few questions.

- "You look familiar to me. Have you ever frequented the pubs in *Prestwich Village*?"
- "No, I can't say that I have. Why do you ask?"

- "I knew a man by the name of Flynn who looked just like you."
- "You say knew?"
- "Yes, he recently passed away. He was a good friend of mine."
- "And you say he was called Flynn?"
- "That's right."
- "Well, that's a coincidence because my name is Flynn."

Lawrence felt his blood turn cold at this revelation. It was scary and too much of a coincidence that he had come into the orbit of a man who not only looked and sounded like his late friend but also had the same name. Lawrence took a long gulp of his pint to steady his

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nerves. Seeing Lawrence's obvious apprehension the man sought to reassure him.

- "Well Flynn is quite a common name. I've met Flynns all over the world."

Lawrence didn't digest this last comment. He was too wrapped up in his own thoughts.

- "What do you do Mr Flynn?"
- "A bit of this and that. I wheel and deal. What about yourself?"
- "I am trying to write a novel," said Lawrence.

The one distraction from Lawrence's situation had always been the fledgling novel, his *magnus opus*, which now looked like it would never be finished. Without the original Flynn's guidance the task exceeded his powers and all his past efforts now seemed futile and vain. The late Flynn had also been his only friend and *Father Confessor*, a warm human presence in his life so different to the relationship with his real father. Their rapport had been the only positive in an otherwise dismal *Prestwich Village* experience. Lawrence didn't know why he had returned to Manchester. Granted it was the place of his birth and where he had grown up but had that ever been a good enough reason to come home? It was a rough town full of bitter people eager to drag you down with them, and he had managed to escape. Yet despite his ambivalence towards this city he knew that Manchester itself wasn't the problem and he would always be connected to its history, culture and sardonic humour.

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After all, if a man forgot where he came from then he would lose sight of where he was going. Lawrence wondered if he believed that particular *cliché* and decided that it was nonsense and not germane to his situation. It wasn't a question of place but his libidinous appetites and the weaknesses in his character that had led to his downfall. He thought that maybe *hari-kari* of the soul ran in his family.

- "What's your book about young fella?"
- "It's a tale of lust, murder and madness."
- "Like a *Zola* novel?"
- "Exactly. With a bit of *Dostoyevsky* thrown in for good measure."
- "You are following in some large footsteps there."
- "Yes. I think you are right. I am not sure I am up to the task."
- "Well, you can only do your best. I tried to write years ago but gave up."
- "What happened?"
- "I met a woman. She was more important than writing a book. I devoted all my time to her when I wasn't trying to scrape a living."
- "You lived life rather than wrote about it."
- "Yes. I've always found life stranger and more interesting than any piece of fiction."
- "I know what you mean," said Lawrence.

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The rest of the conversation was inconsequential and after shaking hands the man called Flynn left to catch his Liverpool train. Flynn's words had struck home and Lawrence now knew that he would never finish his book. For his own sanity he had to get his life into some kind of order but wasn't sure where to begin. Leaving a half finished pint he exited the station concourse and

fought his way through the crowds. As Lawrence entered *Piccadilly Gardens* he heard a street dealer trying to sell drugs but ignored the offer and carried on head bowed. The nasal Mancunian whine of the hooded vendor had sounded strangely distant and other worldly.

- "Do you want some gear, mate?"

Lawrence's mind was elsewhere and lost in abstraction and yet there was clarity. He now regretted the day he had first grabbed Judith in the kitchen of *flat 2*, in that moment of lustful abandon. He could have been happy with the exclusive attentions of the widow and led a pampered existence. It was only when you lost something that you realized how good it was, thought a dejected Lawrence. Ironically he now missed Mrs Glynn's kinky sex games which had become so tiresome. Moreover he was sorry that he had not pursued the matriarch's fortune in a more single minded manner. What a bloody fool he had been!

A broken man with no prospects Lawrence was reduced to wandering the city in a state of abject self-pity. He knew that he had

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blown his big chance and Mrs Glynn wouldn't have him back now even if he tried. It amazed Lawrence that his

descent had been so rapid, that one wrong decision could lead to such a disastrous outcome and yet he tried to be positive. At least when one reached rock bottom matters couldn't get any worse. Lawrence tried to console himself with that meagre thought.

Desperate he slept rough in an alleyway or park if he found himself too far from home and unable to walk any further. Lawrence's clothing became threadbare and dirty and his bodily hygiene suffered. The one concession he made to personal comfort was the purchase of a moth eaten old army overcoat that kept him reasonably warm. It also had the benefit of large inside pockets for his bottles of whisky, which chinked as he moved amongst the crowds.

Eventually Lawrence stopped paying the rent on his apartment which he had nicknamed *The Heartbreak Hotel*. It manufactured loneliness and he couldn't stand the isolation any longer. Lawrence became homeless full time scouring the streets for news of the real world. He no longer gave a damn what other people thought. As long as he could get drunk every day that was all that mattered. Sometimes Lawrence resorted to shoplifting his liquid medication from supermarkets. Ingeniously he had lined his inside pockets with silver foil and could walk out of shops with a tagged bottle undetected by the alarm system. Lawrence Ross, the son of a famous barrister, had become a common thief. The irony did not escape the failed writer who bore a

further sense of inadequacy following the abortion of his

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novel; the one project that had kept him going and given his life at least a spurious sense of purpose. With nothing seemingly to live for he was waiting for an imminent death. Lawrence wasn't sure if he could bear the pain much longer.

One morning Lawrence found himself in the concourse of the newly revamped *Victoria Station*. It was busy with commuters hurriedly making their way to the city centre office blocks that housed the rapacious banks and parasitic insurance companies. He wasn't sure how he had got there or what exactly had drawn him to this place. Lawrence didn't know what it was about train stations that attracted him. Feeling dizzy and nauseous he sat down on a public bench and tried to focus and order his thoughts in an unfiltered kaleidoscope of confusing images and colours. Squares of dappled light refracted through the giant *Perspex* roof and formed a pattern on the concrete floor reminding him of Neville's chess board. The invalid's King had always represented Charles Ross *QC* and Lawrence's Queen his own mother. How Freudian, he had laughed at the time, but now the joke was on him. An attractive silver haired woman clicked by on her heels reminding him of Rachel in her prime, before the stroke had reduced her to an

idiot doll. Then a younger dark haired beauty caught his eye returning his beseeching look with a sneer of contempt. Was this what madness felt like, being taunted by chimera and ghosts from one's past? Lawrence approached the edge of the platform and peered down at the tracks.

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Judith held Jonathan's hand as the tall young man led her down *Wilmslow Road*. It was late afternoon and the street was busy with students returning home to their digs after a day in the university library and lectures. Judith didn't really know this part of town very well and was struck by the number of Asian restaurants that they had passed.

- "What is this area called?" she asked Jonathan.
- "This is *Rusholme* and the particular bit we are walking through now is called *The Curry Mile*."
- "It's very exotic," said Judith. She felt the vibrancy of the place despite its dirty pavements strewn with litter and malodorous smells emanating from seated beggars. Luckily she was used to squalor with her work at *My Brother's Keeper*.
- "My place isn't far now," said Jonathan.

Unbeknown to the couple they were being followed. Lawrence had been sat in the window of *The Ford Maddox Brown* drinking a special offer double whisky, when Judith had walked past. Quickly he had drained his drink and followed at a discrete distance. Where was the bitch going and who was the good looking bastard with her? , wondered Lawrence. He had to know.

Jonathan's apartment on the fifth floor of the tower block was sparsely furnished but clean and modern. Looking at the view through the living room window she was gripped from behind. Judith struggled and arched her back in order to break free of Jonathan's

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enveloping arms. This only served to intensify the young man's ardour. He grabbed her breasts and kissed her passionately on the neck. Forcing her to the floor he pulled up her skirt and ripped off her under garments. Quickly he unbuckled his belt while keeping his full weight on top of a prone passive Judith. Forcing up her jumper and bra with his free hand he watched her heavy breasts spill from their confinement and rest pendulously either side of her clearly defined rib cage. Jonathan flushed with excitement and was in a state of awe as he greedily took in the opulence of Judith's semi naked form. Touching her between the legs he found that she was ready. The coupling was frantic and animalistic. Getting to his feet Jonathan gazed down at

the beautiful voluptuous Judith and the pink glow of her flesh.

- "You are the most amazing woman that I have ever seen."
- "I bet you say that to all the girls."
- "No, really you are."

Judith raised herself into a sitting position and rearranged her bra and jumper. She pulled down her skirt and picked up the torn knickers.

- "These aren't much use to me now."
- "Yes, sorry about that. I'll get you some new ones."
- "No need. I always carry a spare pair in my bag."
- "That's very resourceful," said Jonathan in a stiffly formal manner which he instantly regretted.

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That said he wondered just how virtuous Judith was. Judith noticed his sudden reticence.

- "Don't worry. I don't usually go around sleeping with strange men."
- "We are not exactly strangers but I did force myself on you."
- "It's okay. I knew what you wanted when you asked me back here, to see where you lived, as

you put it. I needed your body. Women have needs as well you know."

- "Luckily for me. I've been going mad thinking about your body since the day we first met."
- "I don't know why. I am not exactly the glamorous type."
- "I saw through all that. You have the figure of a goddess."
- "I don't feel like a goddess."
- "Well, you should."

Judith stood up and once more gazed out of the window. She noticed that no buildings overlooked Jonathan's flat which was a source of relief. Down below there were some trees and an old man out walking his dog. As her gaze panned round to the right she saw someone sat on a bench looking up at her. She couldn't believe who it was. Lawrence was outraged that Judith had taken another lover. Cursing under his breath he had set off towards *Victoria Station* in a huff.

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Oliver had spotted Flynn wandering around Norwich after his death or at least thought that he had. That had been wishful thinking on his part. The last time that Oliver had actually, verifiably seen Flynn they had both

been drunk and got into a stupid argument. Oliver had told his best friend where to go in his best *Anglo-Saxon* and the Irishman had stormed off in high dudgeon. Three days later Oliver got the tragic news. Alarmed by the smell coming from Flynn's flat the Norwich constabulary had knocked in his front door. Flynn had been dead for some time. He was laid by the window with a plastic bag over his head having also taken a near lethal dosage of sleeping tablets. The former *Mullins Exhibitioner* and Honk Kong speculator had committed suicide in a back water *East Anglian* apartment. Oliver blamed himself and never got over his friend's untimely death. Shortly after the funeral he had packed his bags and eventually would return to his native Manchester looking for Flynn-like anonymity in the big city.

Chapter 17 – Oliver

Dear Mrs Glynn,

I thought long and hard before writing you this letter but I can't contain myself any longer. Ever since I can remember I have loved you and now my desire has become intolerable. While sorry to hear of your husband's death at last we can now be together. You are the most beautiful woman that I have ever seen. I dreamed of you as a teenager and have done so ever since. When I was sixteen I would spy on you from my bedroom window as you tended your garden. Remember those tight red trousers that you used to wear! That image, with you in blissful ignorance of my longing, has been a source of inspiration for the last dozen or more years. Now as a mature man my passion and craving know no bounds. I cannot remain silent any longer now that nothing stands in our way. We must be together or I will be forever doomed to live a life of spiritual and physical frustration.

Yours eternally, Oliver.

P.S. Name a time and place and I will be there.

Oliver looked again at the letter which he had included in *Chapter Two*. It summed up the author's feelings about the widow notwithstanding the fakery about teenage lust and the bit about having known Mrs Glynn

for years since childhood. The letter on the screen had never even been committed to paper let alone sent to Mrs Glynn. Oliver's real life obsession had only started soon after

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moving into *The Grange* twelve months earlier. He had bought the property for cash on the basis of its location which he had thought was quiet and nicely out of the way. *The Grange* would be somewhere where he wouldn't be disturbed. Unfortunately that first sighting of Mrs Glynn had brought all the memories of his beloved matron flooding back.

The very first time he had passed the widow in the building's vestibule and been exposed to her scented presence his stomach had churned uncontrollably like that of a love struck virgin. He soon found out from another neighbour that the widow had been married for many years but now lived alone in *flat 1*. From that moment on Mrs Glynn dominated his thoughts and Oliver knew that he was lost and no longer in control of his destiny. In an attempt to break her spell he had tried once more to write and hoped that by incorporating her into a fictional story he would somehow be able to work through and resolve his irrational fixation. Now he realized that the unfinished novel was not going to free him from his bondage, not

caring anymore if his imaginary alter-ego Lawrence killed himself or went mad.

Oliver's tactic of portraying Mrs Glynn as a geriatric quadriplegic in the novel had only heightened his desire for the woman downstairs. His attempt to supplant her erotic centrality with a younger more nubile heroin had also backfired. He was now so enthralled with the older woman that he couldn't even kill off her character in the story which would have been the logical thing to do and his original

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intention. It was ironic that all his efforts to exorcise his feelings of lust for Mrs Glynn had failed so spectacularly. Oliver had merely projected and intensified his lust for the widow via the imaginary villain of the piece, Lawrence. Living out his fantasies through the fictional male lead had satisfied his needs in the short term but these purely masturbatory visualisations were ultimately unsatisfactory.

In real life Oliver was too timid to write and send letters to the object of his love let alone engage Mrs Glynn in an actual conversation. When it came to the opposite sex and affairs of the heart he was a novice. Oliver had never shared the same bed with a living and breathing woman; his amatory conquests, such as they were, consisting of a series of sweaty encounters with inflatable latex dolls.

The literary therapeutic experiment had failed in its central purpose though the physical discipline of writing had kept him busy for a while and beneficially stimulated his imagination, albeit in an ultimately fruitless direction. Oliver had made up virtually all the characters in *Judith Glynn* apart from Mrs Glynn who he barely knew. Lawrence, Judith, the Horowitzs and the Burgers, Peggy, Bride and Flynn in his Prestwich incarnation were all figments of his lurid mind. In reality Mrs Glynn was a respectable God fearing woman who raised money for local charities and was utterly devoted to her husband's memory. Lawrence had looked up her profile on the internet and found that her reputation and standing were

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unimpeachable. He had also found a photograph of her at a charity raising event which he had cropped, enlarged and then framed. The picture took pride of place on his desk and Oliver would spend hours look adoringly at the beautiful and saintly Mrs Glynn. Any suggestion that she was a wanton nymphomaniac was an outrageous slur on her good name and character. To traduce Mrs Glynn in such a way said far more about Oliver's repressed sexual desires than anything else; a point he readily conceded. He felt terribly guilty about her representation in the novel. With the benefit of

hindsight his novel should only have featured one lustful female; the eponymous and fictitious Judith. Reading *Judith Glynn* again Oliver saw that it was the thinly disguised story of his own life. You didn't have to be a psychoanalyst to see that Oliver was the victim of an unresolved *Oedipus Complex*; his fixation on the matronly Mrs Glynn a classic sign of psychological immaturity and possibly the result of not being breast fed. In reality his father had been just like Frank Horowitz; an unreconstructed male chauvinist and functioning alcoholic who dominated Oliver's mother to the extent of crushing the last semblances of her personality. Moreover the father had belittled his only son and written him off as an *effete* little mummy's boy.

Short of confidence and low on self esteem Oliver had never developed a relationship with his father and found it difficult to form adult friendships with other men. He had only ever truly loved his mother who he still worshipped in spite of her many weaknesses. He wished that she had been stronger and stood up more forcibly to his bully of a father. Oliver wished that she had been more like Mrs

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Glynn or even Mrs Burger rather than a repressed Mrs Horowitz type seeking comfort in food or the numbing oblivion of anti-depressants. Then she might not have resorted to taking her own life and he wouldn't have

been left alone with such an insensitive brute of a father and guardian. Oliver would never forget the day that he had entered the family home unexpectedly and found his father screwing a neighbour across the kitchen table. His mother had still been alive at the time and had only just been admitted to the psychiatric hospital for treatment. It wasn't long after that treacherous act that she had found out about the infidelity and had taken the sleeping tablets. Oliver never forgave his father and told him so to his face when the tyrant finally gasped his last breath on his death bed.

Under the supervision of the relevant authorities orphan Oliver continued to attend the boarding school near Cheltenham which he hated. His teenage years were spent crossing off the days to the time when he would inherit his parents' money and finally be free. Though intelligent and studious Oliver hated the conformity of school and developed an ingrained hostility to authority. He loathed sports especially team games and preferred solitary pursuits like reading and chess. Oliver was an ugly child who developed into an equally unprepossessing adult. Short in stature with a disfiguring curvature to the spine he also suffered from asthma. In many ways the character of Neville was based on Oliver. Yet secretly Oliver had always envied his masculine extrovert peers who played rugby and lifted huge weights. After school and entering adult life

he wished that he could talk to women in the relaxed care free way that other men did

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instead of being a tongue tied gibbering idiot. Oliver longed to be like Lawrence. He wanted women to find him devastatingly attractive and have the self confidence and strength of purpose to take them in his arms.

Prior to Mrs Glynn and apart from his mother there had only been one other woman. Mrs Flynn had been the buxom school matron at the Cheltenham boarder. Married to the games master Jack Flynn, who had played rugby for Ireland, she had taken the place of Oliver's mother in his affections. Whenever he was free from lessons he would seek her out in the medical room on some spurious pretext just in order to hear her soothing voice and occasionally experience her gentle touch. A small cut on the finger would necessitate a band aid or a grazed knee the application of anti-septic rubbed in adroitly by the medically trained former nurse. On one delicious occasion Mrs Flynn had kissed his finger better after applying an ointment to a blackened nail. Her intentions were the purely innocent actions of a happily married woman who recognized the boy's need for maternal affection. To Oliver these little intimate moments represented much more than purely wholesome and appropriate interactions. The

emotionally starved teenager was experiencing the hormonally charged upheaval of puberty and his constant need to masturbate coincided with his fledgling admiration for Mrs Flynn and fervent sexual awakening. Forever he would associate sexual fulfilment with plump mature women of a respectable and sober disposition. Mrs Flynn and later on Mrs Glynn would always be his type.

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Of course there had been a brief period growing up when Oliver had questioned his sexuality. Maybe his father was right about his lack of masculinity and that he was a *little fairy* after all. Certainly public school had afforded him plenty of opportunities to test that particular hypothesis. Buggery was rife in the dorms once the lights went out at *9pm*; barely stifled moans audible as bed springs creaked and pillows were bitten in an attempt to keep the noise down and maintain the secrecy of these nocturnal orgies. Resisting entreaties to participate Oliver's sole release took place in the privacy of a locked toilet and was usually quick. All he had to do was summon up the image of Mrs Flynn unbuttoning her starched white blouse and that was enough. Half a dozen strokes of his penis shaft would send his body into an exhilarating spasm. The force of the contractions always took him by surprise with their intensity but Oliver never forgot that first almost spiritual ejaculation and all his subsequent efforts

seemed in some ways a forlorn attempt to recapture its novelty and intensity. Just thinking about that never to be surpassed event would drive him to unbuckle his trousers and try it again. Years later the mere sight of Mrs Glynn made him think of Mrs Flynn and the unparalleled ecstasy of that first seminal experience. He had drawn on this memory when describing Judith's first sexual encounter with Lawrence in the kitchen, remembering his breathlessness and racing heart as his body had taken complete control and subjugated his servile consciousness.

Apart from masturbation Oliver's childhood years were pretty much devoid of cheer and consolation. His existence became even more

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unbearable in the summer holidays when he had to live with his father for three agonising months. On one occasion he had run away from his Knutsford home and slept rough on the streets of Manchester for two weeks. His father had not noticed his absence and the recriminations and punishment that Oliver was expecting on his return did not materialize. Consequently he ran away again and ended up dossing in a night shelter near *Salford Precinct* for the rest of the holidays, only returning home the day before he was due to catch the train back to Cheltenham. His father's one solitary remark that indicated Oliver

actually existed came as the schoolboy boarded the train at *Piccadilly Station*: "You look as though you have lost a bit of weight. It suits you."

Oliver had enjoyed his down and out experience which had been inspired by Orwell's similar adventures before the war; a book he had avidly read. He had met some interesting characters and a couple of friends even, which was more than he could say for his social circle at the Cheltenham boarding school. Oliver had learned how to sleep on sheets of discarded cardboard and more importantly where to bed down safely like an animal out of sight. He soon picked up an intimate knowledge of where one could get free food which was distributed by various charities and individuals around the city at different times of day. The day to day existence of foraging for food and shelter and staying clean and healthy was a never ending exercise in survival. Oliver had been initiated in street craft the hard way, being mugged a couple of times by older vagrants who had picked up on his naivety and vulnerability.

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Now he knew how to tightly roll up his money and sew it into the seams of his jeans and to dispense with any items that might draw avaricious attention such as watches and jewellery. The days went slowly and at first Oliver found the boredom of being homeless the

hardest challenge but soon he learned to roll with the rhythm of the streets. Living in the moment was the key.

The homeless veterans who took Oliver under their wing taught him how to survive and how to occupy his time. Oliver couldn't bring himself to beg but was fascinated by the shop lifting exploits of his new peers who had the shabby glamour of modern day *Fagins*. After his first couple of nervous efforts which had been laughably transparent Oliver took to theft quite naturally. It gave him added satisfaction to think of his hated policeman father while he was pilfering various items of merchandise from the city's department stores. Soon he became fearless and particularly adept and was helped by his boyish looks and stunted stature which added to his apparent innocence and anonymity.

It was almost as if Oliver was too small to be picked up by the *CCTV* security cameras and he soon acquired the nickname of *The Invisible Man*. Oliver learned a lot that summer and felt more confident about anything that life might throw his way in the future. More than anything the adventure had taught him a lot about people. He had been accepted by individuals who had nothing to their name yet had versed him in the arts of survival and most of all they had not judged Oliver disparagingly. It had meant everything to him to be accepted

as a member of a group no matter how vilified and beyond the pale his new associates appeared to the wider world.

Oliver had been left a sizeable sum following the death of his father. If he was careful and lived frugally he knew that he would never have to work. Yet Oliver celebrated extravagantly following his tormentor's demise. He travelled the world and spent six months living it up in a hotel in *Manhattan* getting drunk on *Champagne* and paying for prostitutes to just sit and talk. Feeling purged of some of his childhood frustrations Oliver returned to the north of England and bought the apartment in *The Grange*. Once ensconced in his new home he started to read avidly; mostly European and American modern fiction. For recreation he trawled the internet and was impressed by the speed of the apartment's free *Wi-Fi* connection. Oliver kept himself to himself and only had minimal contact with his neighbours when he encountered someone in the corridor or the communal car park. He was as happy as he had ever been with his pornographic web sites, his books, and his financial independence. It rained all the time but his pursuits were solitary and of the indoor variety so he didn't feel inconvenienced by the inclement weather. Everything had been just *hunky dory* until that was he became aware of Mrs Glynn.

Unable to sleep, being totally obsessed with the curvy Mrs Glynn, Oliver could no longer escape his obsession. Even heavy sedatives taken last thing at night failed to work. He tried exhausting sessions of masturbation hoping that sheer fatigue would induce

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unconsciousness but he was lucky if he got thirty minutes rest a night. Oliver imagined the widow in various scenarios and playing a multitude of different characters though the fantasies crucially had one central abiding theme. Whether a nurse, teacher or some other authority figure Mrs Glynn would always be manually bringing him to a climax with soothing maternal words of encouragement: "That's it, Oliver. That's a good boy. See, that wasn't so bad after all. Let me kiss it better now."

Oliver considered seeing a psychiatrist. Eventually he plucked up the courage to visit a man recommended by his *GP* and the consultations hadn't come cheap. Once settled on the couch Oliver had outlined the nature of the problem and detailed its genesis. The psychiatrist had listened attentively and without interruption while his patient recounted his schooldays and the impact of Mrs Flynn on his teenage years at the Cheltenham boarder. Oliver wasn't impressed with the verdict when the hired expert finally spoke.

- "It's not unusual for men to like older women with large breasts."
- "Yes, but my fetish can't be normal," replied Oliver.
- "Apart from the fact that you masturbate excessively I don't think that you have that much of a problem."
- "What do you suggest then?"
- "Well, the object of your fixation, the widow downstairs, is in all probability unobtainable. I think you should get out more and occupy your time rather than brooding on the subject."

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- "What do you suggest I do all day then? I don't have an occupation."
- "What about going to the pub? It's a good way of making new friends. And in the meantime I will prescribe you some anti-depressants and some strong sleeping tablets. My advice is to get out more, take long walks, and drink lots of beer."
- "That sounds like things that you would like to do if you had the time."
- "Exactly. You don't realize just how lucky you are. You are off the grid and living the dream. Enjoy yourself."
- "I'm glad you think so. It doesn't feel that way at times."

- “Feelings are important. Perhaps you could write them down every day in a diary.”
- “I’m head of you with that one doctor.”

The sessions had been stretched over a series of weeks but Oliver had condensed what he had gleaned into the above abridged dialogue. Predictably the sleeping tablets hadn’t worked and the anti-depressants had made it impossible for him to complete cryptic crosswords making him even more depressed than ever. Now he felt stupid as well as being a sad case and so he had stopped taking the mood enhancers. The only beneficial change to his daily routine had been the long walks suggested by the psychiatrist and recommended boozy sessions in the nearby pubs. People now recognized Oliver and acknowledged his presence accepting him as a new recruit to the

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local boozing fraternity. But drinking excessively was not without its problematic side effects. It made masturbation more difficult though he always stuck doggedly to his task. The tried and tested images of Mrs Glynn and vintage recollections of Mrs Flynn from his archive files always worked. That wasn’t the problem. The difficulty Oliver faced was an attention deficit caused by his inebriated state. However, once he was locked on to his target like a fighter jet in a dog fight a

happy ending was guaranteed. Oliver trained his mind to achieve a *zen-like* focus on demand but in the event of unwelcome distraction he always had his go-to prop. The framed photograph of Mrs Glynn which sat proudly on his desk was always ready to hand. And as for keeping a diary Oliver went one better. He had started to re-write his *magnus opus*, *Judith Glynn*, which he aimed to one day publish online. The writing would be shamelessly autobiographical and hopefully therapeutic, but Oliver secretly dreamed that the novel would turn out to be a masterpiece and cement his place in the literary canon.

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EPILOGUE:

Oliver had considered selling up and leaving *The Grange* for good but that final decision could wait. He would entrust the leasing of the property to the estate agents and move down to London in advance. There

was nothing to keep him in Manchester now that he had given up on the novel and there was the question of his mental wellbeing to be considered. If he stayed he knew that he would do something stupid like make a lunge for Mrs Glynn in the hallway. He had even considered ringing her door bell and gaining admittance on some pretext so that he could make his feelings known, but had wisely baulked at the idea. At least by being proactive and leaving at a time of his choosing he was avoiding an ignominious exit or even worse the prospect of facing a charge of indecent assault. The only way to try and get the widow out of his mind was to move two hundred miles south and make a fresh start. The decision was made and there would be no change of heart.

As Oliver loaded his suitcase into the boot of the waiting taxi Mrs Glynn looked on through the net curtains of *flat 1*. She was mildly irritated that the young man from upstairs was leaving so soon. He was quite dishy really in a short dark way and a neighbour had told her that he was a writer which indicated a degree of sensitivity. Moreover the widow thought that he looked a bit like a young Daniel, her late husband. She wondered why he had been so painfully shy these past months when it was obvious that she liked him. Had he not seen her posing in her underwear that time? Frustrated by his

inaction she had nearly taken it on herself to ask him round for a coffee but she was a woman of a certain age with a reputation to consider and rejection would have been intolerable. Mrs Glynn had hoped that by smiling at him when their paths crossed in the hallway that he would get the message and think of an excuse to call on her.

Oliver looked at the frontal facade of *The Grange* for possibly the last time as the taxi pulled away. If he had finished *Judith Glynn* he would have had Lawrence leave for London in the same way but that was all academic now. Seeing the car pull away Mrs Glynn shook her head in regret and walked to the bedroom. Today she felt like dressing up and expressing her femininity. Looking through her underwear drawer she pulled out the black suspender belt and matching sheer stockings which had never failed to produce the desired effect on men. As she rolled a stocking on to her raised right leg the widow glanced at the bedside clock. There was still plenty of time. The hunky repair man wasn't due for at least another half an hour.

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BOOK 2 - *The Philosopher King*

"The unexamined life is not worth living" - Socrates

Prologue:

Terence-Marcus Glynn had not heard from his mother for several months but when he received an unexpected phone call he agreed to her request without hesitation. She wanted him to track down a certain gentleman and had dictated the man's last known address in London. It struck Terence-Marcus as a bit rum. Usually his widowed mother didn't have any problems finding men, so he was naturally intrigued.

-“I got this address off the lettings agent. Can you see if he is still there?” she had asked.

-“May I ask why mother?” was his first question.

Mrs Glynn maintained that it was no big secret. She just wanted to speak to him about the new tenant leasing his property.

-“He's terribly noisy and is in the flat directly above mine in *The Grange*.”

Terence-Marcus knew his mother well enough and accepted that he probably wasn't getting the full story.

-“If I find... what's his name again?”

-“Oliver Ross, darling, Oliver Ross.”

-“If I find Mr Ross then I will pass on your message, mother,” he had reassured, concluding the brief conversation with a few farewell endearments.

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Terence-Marcus took the next morning off work and used the underground system. It only necessitated making one change and travelling half a dozen stops. Within an hour he had found the hotel in Sussex Gardens where the East European reception man confirmed that Oliver Ross had been a guest. No forwarding address had been left so Terence-Marcus phoned his mother with the information that the trail was cold.

I found out months later about Terence-Marcus’s fruitless errand and that I bore a resemblance to his father and Mrs Glynn’s late husband, Daniel. She *was* genuinely concerned about my new irksome tenant but had largely used that as an excuse in order to speak with me. If I had known that the widow wanted me back at *The Grange* then I would have returned to Manchester immediately, a happy but less wise man.

A portentous dream:

Barney Bear had me bound to a stake with heavy iron chains; my fat nemesis attired in nothing but a skimpy pair of *speedos*. As I writhed in agony, a prisoner held captive in a vast leather clad cave, Barney poked me impishly with a trident fork and repeatedly called me *a cheeky northern monkey*. Simultaneously Mrs Glynn, that paragon of womanhood, danced seductively before a roaring fire; her gyrating form clad only in transparent silk fabrics. The accompanying sound track consisted of wailing and relentless beating drums growing louder and faster as the widow's movements increased in intensity. Socrates, my saviour, beseeched me to avert my gaze from the tantalizing siren as her sinuous body, framed by bright flames, cast flickering enticing shadows on to the cave walls. -"Don't look at her!" had screamed Socrates. -"Look away and you will break free of your bonds." I did as I was told though it required superhuman strength and determination. The harder I had tried to avert my eyes the more Mrs Glynn's veiled dance had demanded my attention. Finally I broke free

from my restraints and the painful stabbing of Barney's Bear's malicious spear. I kicked him hard up the arse for good measure causing him to squeal and his flabby body to wobble like jelly. -"Leave the cave, Oliver! Head towards the light," had exhorted Socrates. Insatiable lust and sexual obsession for a woman had made me run away from Manchester. Mrs Glynn, the voluptuous matron, was the compelling reason for my hasty and ignominious departure.

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The Smoke:

It didn't take long to find and rent a box like space in *Sussex Gardens*. The Paddington area was always going to be a good first stop on my journey; full of trash and hookers reminding me of the streets back home. Oldrich, the desk guy downstairs was a chain smoking Slovakian; the kind of sallow skinned individual who never really looks clean. He seemed happy enough to take a month's rent without giving me the third degree; the why's and the how long's. I wasn't surprised by his unquestioning attitude given the state of the place; the carpet in the bedroom was sticky with filth and the mattress irreparably stained with the possibility of scabies infestation, but it was a safe enough bolt-hole and I needed time to think. Writing that bloody novel had been only made matters worse; the fixation fuelled

by my pornographic prose. Her photograph was propped up on the bedside locker by the uncomfortable bed seemingly pummelled out of shape over a thousand sweaty days and nights. She was two hundred miles away and we were both out of danger. I hoped that I would forget Mrs Glynn in time, I really did. I should have got rid of her photograph but I couldn't do it. It wasn't time to let go.

When a man is tired of London he is tired of life - Dr Johnson.

London is shite – a disenchanted Mancunian.

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I soon adjusted to the hustle and bustle of the metropolis with its grating cacophony of traffic and overhead jets. The raucous imprecations of aggressive cab drivers and illegal pavement entrepreneurs selling dodgy perfumes quickly lost their novelty. There were a lot of foreign faces and strange accents competing for attention in this grimy multi-cultural bazaar; more exotic and diverse than the northern cities. At times I felt like a foreigner in my own country, a tired confused alien frazzled by the heat and the streets. *The Edgeware Road* is dominated by *shisha* cafes and Middle Eastern eateries attracting swarthy looking

Levantines but familiar bright red buses still turn on to *Praed Street* in the direction of the train terminus built by Brunel. I walked to *Marble Arch* and thought of the bad old days and the *Paddington Frisk*, the spasmodic twitching of hanged criminals at *Tyburn*. It was Sunday morning with outraged Muslims and offended Jews trading insults across a thinly policed divide. -“Get out of Gaza you Zionist scum.” -“You are terrorists.” -“You are a terrorist state.” - “We are a democracy.” - “You worship false prophets.” - “Islam is a hate filled religion.” - “You will rot in hell.” - “You are deluded.” - “It is our land,” - “No, it is our land”.....etc etc.

I grew bored with the verbal jousting of *Speaker's Corner*. After a return walk down *Oxford Street* I ventured into *Hyde Park* and watched the ducks circling on the lake; mallard and teal, simple creatures driven by instincts. Sex had drawn me to Mrs Glynn and survival had made me run away. I had sought salvation in creativity

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but the unintelligibility of the exhibits in the *Serpentine Gallery* reminded me of my own shortcomings and the limitations of art. The misguided tactic of portraying Mrs Glynn in a novel had only heightened my desire.

It was time for some liquid anaesthetic but then again it always was. Another pub this time off *Gloucester Square* lured me in and I bought a pint of tepid ale causing a bar-fly's antennae to twitch in response to my presence. The tough little shit feeder approached. He was a short unkempt bloke of about thirty who reminded me of the cartoon character *Barney Bear* with his stupid round face but the animated version looked more intelligent.

-“How's it going, chief? You new in town?” he inquired. It was hard to take the mockney accent seriously.

-“Very well thank you. I am a tourist passing through.”

- “You're Northern, 'aint ya? I hate Northerners,” he declared.

-“Good for you,” I replied with a smile, which he hadn't been expecting; politeness can be so disarming. He looked me up and down in fresh appraisal. -“I can see that you are a bit of a cool customer, chief.”

-“I will take that as a compliment,” I replied as the conversation developed.

-“You're not an *iron* are ya?”

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-“An *iron*?”

-“Yeah, an *iron hoof, poof.*”

-“No, certainly not.”

-“Good, I’ve not got much time for *irons*.”

-“I can assure you that I am straight as a dye.”

-“Come again?”

-“Forget it. I’m not an *iron*, okay?”

-“Message received, chief.”

Preliminaries dispensed with Barney Bear recounted his life story, a tale of serial misfortune. He was currently sleeping in his car parking up wherever he could for the night, assuming that he really owned a car or anything he had said was true. Judging by his soiled attire and rancid smell he *was* down on his luck.

-“Where you staying then?” asked Barney.

-“*Sussex Gardens*.”

-“Whereabouts?”

-“I’d rather not say.”

-“Good answer, chief. Never tell anyone your business.”

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I was interested to see where this dialogue was heading. Homosexual Barney was fooling no one with

the butch patter - anyone that virulently homophobic had to be an *iron*.

-“You into football?”

-“Not really,” I replied.

-“You sure you’re not an *iron*?”

Barney could sense that I was getting bored.

-“The only reason I mention the footie is that I know a few of the boys from the Millwall firm,” he explained.

-“Like I said, sport is not my thing,” I replied.

-“You’re a strange one. Thought you might want to meet a few of the chaps. There’s a big organized ruck coming up at Reading on Saturday.”

-“Unfortunately I am busy on Saturday but it was kind of you to think of me.”

Barney shook his head in amused disbelief and took another thoughtful sip of his beer. He looked me up and down before openly staring at my crotch.

-“You are not a bad looking bloke. There’s something about ya.”

-“I’ve never regarded myself that way, being a novice when it comes to women,” I stated self-deprecatingly.

-“Forget women. You have charisma and it looks as though you are packing.”

Packing? , the impertinent oaf, I thought, at the same time not being exactly sure what he meant.

-“Thank you, for your kind words - I don’t know your name?”

-“George, call me George,” smiled Barney lasciviously, “and your name is?”

-“Oliver,” I replied.

As soon as I reasonably could I made my excuses inventing a pressing appointment. Leaving the pub I heard Barney’s lisping farewell, -“See ya around, Oliver, ya cheeky northern monkey.”

-“Not if I have got anything to do with it,” I whispered under my breath.

Eager to put some distance between me and Barney Bear I kept walking before finding another pub tucked down a side street near *Grosvenor Square*. Ordering my second pint of extortionately priced bitter I found a quiet corner. I should have known that the hiatus wouldn’t last for long. A woman of middling years dressed in an all in one leather skirt and bib, with peroxide blonde hair and killer high heels, made a beeline for my table.

-“Hi handsome, want to buy a lady a drink?”

-“Why not,” I replied. A mature blonde was preferable to being chatted up by a gay football hooligan with personal hygiene issues. I thought I might get lucky and perhaps forget Mrs Glynn.

-“What can I get you?” I asked.

-“Brandy and Coke,” she replied shamelessly. -“Could you make it a double? I’ve had a trying day.”

-“Certainly.”

I asked if she wanted an ice bucket but my sarcasm fell on deaf ears. As the drinks flowed that afternoon so did the conversation.

Trudie was a self-confessed tart desperately trying to get off the streets. I don’t know who suggested it but after a couple of hours of flirtatious chatter we ended up back at my hotel. Oldrich gave her a knowing smile as we made our way up the rickety stairs to my first floor room. I wondered if they were in cahoots, or he was simply being friendly. As soon as I closed the door she was all over me with tongue and lips working her fingers down the front of my ever tightening trousers.

-“Draw the curtains, I just need to freshen up,” she commanded with the self confidence and purpose of a veteran. I did as I was told and took advantage of her

temporary absence, hastily undressing and quickly diving under the sheets. I could see the glow of the bathroom light under the closed door and heard the toilet flush as she finished her ministrations. The door opened slowly and she stood there in

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nothing but her underwear allowing me the time to take in her silhouetted form. I felt myself growing aroused under the confining weight of the heavy sheets and counterpane as she walked slowly towards the bed like a cat walk pro.

-“You don’t waste any time, sugar. Now I just want you to relax.”

And so I finally lost my virginity...Trudie directed me through the nervous audition yet it was the image of Mrs Glynn that brought me to a climax, the widow not a common prostitute who lay beneath my thrusting loins...

I felt a naive sense of pride at successfully negotiating this test of manhood. My lover seemed less euphoric and asked if I had anything to drink. I quickly found a half bottle of whisky in my bag which she gratefully opened and poured into a chipped cloudy glass on the bedside locker. Taking a long swig and pouring herself a re-fill she turned to me with an anxious expression.

Suddenly she looked old and I was expecting her to ask for some cash.

-“Oliver, there is something that I have to tell you. I really like you and if we are to see each other again then I need to get this guilty secret off my chest.”

-“What is it, Trudie?” I was eager to find out about the secret but at the same time relieved that she hadn’t asked me for money.

-“You like me Oliver don’t you?”

-“I think you are beautiful, Trudie.”

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-“That was your first time wasn’t it?”

-“Yes.”

-“I thought so. Oliver, there is no easy way to say this so I will come straight to the point. Oliver, I was born a man.”

No lie-detector results, no pausing for dramatic effect. I felt slightly cheated that she had delivered this bomb shell secret so matter-of-factly.

-“But that’s impossible!”

Unthinkingly I poured myself a large whisky and swallowed in one. Trudie looked tearfully into my eyes as if she could read my mind, forcing me to speak again

as if in doing so I could change the brutal truth of the situation and somehow talk myself into an alternative more palatable reality.

-“But you are so feminine. You have breasts and a vagina!”

She smiled affectionately as if I had just paid her the biggest compliment in the world. Now it was her/his turn to speak.

-“Yes, I have had a full transition. I had to go to Casablanca for the vaginal construction last summer. That was the difficult procedure; the rest is the result of hormone treatment prescribed by the *NHS*.”

Her vagina *had* felt like a very deep cleft when my fingers had wandered under the sheets, but based on a sample of one I had just

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considered it normal and wondered how the hell I was going to satisfy this woman or any woman for that matter. My immediate concern now was to retrieve my underpants from across the room and put them speedily back on. Had I just had sex with a man or a woman? I needed a time-out to consider the implications of what had just happened and insensitively made the *T-sign* with upright fingers meeting horizontal palm.

-“Trudie, I think I would like you to go right now.”

-“That’s okay sugar. You can’t handle the truth.”

She quickly got dressed and without looking back closed the door quietly and rather sadly behind her. I pragmatically put on my sticky underpants, trousers and a fresh shirt and quickly emptied the bottle of whisky. My innocence was finally lost but to a woman with male *DNA*! The irony did not escape me after all those years of resisting predatory homosexuals at *Cheltenham College*. I needed some fresh air so made my way down to the hotel lobby.

Oldrich smiled at me insolently as I passed his desk. He knew that I had just slept with a transgender prostitute! It was so obvious.

-“See you later, stud,” he said mockingly before returning his attention to a well thumbed paperback, a half smoked cigarette dangling from his protruding bottom lip.

Unbelievably I saw Barney Bear approaching as I turned left in the direction of Bayswater and my initial paranoid reaction was to think

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that he must be scouring the area for me. Instinctively I hid, quickly ducking down behind the front wall of a *Bed and Breakfast* a couple of doors down from my hotel.

Barney Bear passed by without noticing my nervous crouching form as I wondered what he would make of Trudie. As soon as it was safe I jogged on; the mild exercise clearing away the fog of booze...

Seeing Trudie again was definitely out of the question. For all my liberal opinions I just wasn't that broad minded and I couldn't forgive her initial deception which now made me feel angry. On the plus side I had experienced my first genuine sexual encounter and where was the harm? My mind made up I suddenly felt ravenous and in need of a good nosh. Resolutely I set off towards a little Greek bistro I had noticed a couple of days earlier near to *Paddington Station*; the menu in the window had looked promising and affordable.

The decor in *The Kozmoz* was typically Aegean with white and blue walls adorned by various Greek tableaus and classical ornaments dotted about the place. It looked clean and tastefully appointed in the candlelight and one could see a busy kitchen at the end of the room through a serving hatch. A stocky bald waiter quickly noticed my presence and showed me to a table set for two in a discrete alcove. Removing the superfluous cutlery and napkins he handed me a menu. I ordered a bottle of house *retsina* and settled down to read the bill of fare at my leisure. There was no rush especially in view of the day that I had just had first with Barney Bear's predatory overtures and then sexual intercourse with a transgender prostitute.

The waiter returned with an excellent chilled wine and introduced himself as Socrates.

-“Socrates? That’s your real name.”

-“Yes sir, Socrates is my real name. I am from Athens originally.”

I smiled at this preposterous character and poured myself a glass. Tasting and approving of the subtle pine flavour and aroma I proposed a silent toast to myself – To you, Socrates.

The meal was excellent. I started with some humus and pita bread and a feta salad liberally doused in virgin olive oil. The main was a beef *stifado* followed by a chocolate dessert, coffee, a glass of *ouzo* and more coffee with brandy. Afterwards I felt wonderfully sated without the accompanying bloated sensation that can sometimes follow a gastronomic blow-out. The restaurant was closing and I was left alone with Socrates after the chef had wished me a good night and issued his waiter some final instructions in Greek. Socrates approached with a full bottle of *ouzo* and asked if he could join me for drink on the house. Having tipped generously and praised the food I took the gesture at face value; an act of friendliness and appreciation of a good customer. Maybe there were some people in London who didn’t have an agenda.

Socrates had undone his top button and casually sat down in the seat across the table from mine. He poured two large glasses of the aniseed tasting liquor and added water to his own glass before doing the same with mine.

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-“Back home we drink *ouzo* with water like this. Not lemonade,” he explained.

-“Yes, I prefer it this way too,” I replied.

-“This was your first time I think?”

-“Pardon?”

-“Your first time in *The Kozmoz*.”

-“Oh yes, yes! It was my first time.”

-“You enjoyed the experience?”

-“I loved it, and the service was excellent.”

I raised my glass to toast the good health of Socrates.

-“Thank you sir, you are too kind.”

A beaming Socrates also raised his glass in acknowledgement.

-“The pleasure was all mine,” I replied.

-“If you don’t mind me saying, young man, you are not a typical Englishman.”

-“In what way, Socrates?”

-“Well, Oliver, you don’t mind me calling you Oliver? I noticed your name on your credit card when you paid.”

-“No, feel free.”

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-“You seem more cultured than an average Englishman I would say.”

-“That’s very kind of you to say so but on what basis are you making this judgement?” I asked out of curiosity and the *ouzo* was starting to take effect hence the candour on my part.

-“I can see an intellectual curiosity in your eyes, a thirst for knowledge.”

-“Well, I find people interesting and I like to travel,” I replied.

-“You do not strike me as the Benidorm type.”

-“Certainly not, Socrates.”

With that the conversation settled into a more mundane rhythm. Socrates told me about his wife and two children back in Athens and how he was allowed extended time off a couple of times a year to go home.

-“I work in England like a slave but Stavros, my boss, is a good man. He has to make a living. It is very difficult to do this back home for all Greeks.”

I nodded sympathetically.

-“One day I will return to Athens. If it wasn’t for my family I would be there right now.”

-“But you said it is difficult to make a living back home?” I interjected, not feeling even remotely guilty about my inherited wealth.

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-“If I was a single man then I would live on the streets. Material possessions do not interest me.”

-“Like the real Socrates back in the day.”

-“Exactly.”

-“To Socrates!”

-“To Socrates!”

We chinked glasses as we toasted the old philosopher’s health. Socrates, the waiter, now looked more serious.

-“This isn’t hemlock is it?” I enquired playfully.

-“If it was then only I would be drinking the poison,” replied Socrates.

For a few seconds there was an uneasy silence before Socrates picked up the thread of the conversation once more.

-“Like Odysseus I will return to my wife one day.”

-“Let’s hope that she doesn’t remarry in your absence,” I quipped.

-“You joke, my friend, but there is a serious point that you make,” said Socrates mournfully. “It is not a natural state of affairs for husband and wife to be separated for too long. Do you have a woman?”

-“There is someone but it’s difficult.”

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-“Say no more. I understand. Maybe you will be together one day?” consoled Socrates.

-“Maybe,” I replied.

This guy reminded me of Flynn, a former mentor, pub philosopher and associate from back home. We had been drinking buddies and soul mates in Manchester and Socrates was the same type of confidant. Every day I would meet Flynn in *The Donkey* to discuss the progress of my novel, until that fateful morning when he died of a stroke just before opening time. The shock of his death had contributed to my writer’s block and

precipitated the downward spiral into problem drinking. I seemed to attract the older man only too willing to impart their worldly advice, first Flynn and now Socrates.

-“I was thinking of travelling to Europe. What do you think?”

In truth I needed to get out of London swiftly and forget the whole Trudie experience. Socrates cheered up when I mentioned travel.

-“You must go to Athens, Oliver. This was meant to be. Meeting me tonight and our talk of Athens was pre-determined!”

-“You don’t believe in fate do you, Socrates?”

-“Not exactly, for I am a man of reason, but one should always have a healthy scepticism about all so called certainties and common sense. I think you should go to Athens, my boy. I will tell you where to go.”

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-“I will give the matter some thought.”

I remember feeling rather pleased with myself for sounding so mature.

-“Very wise my friend. Keep impulse in check and use this, at all times.”

Socrates had pointed towards his head. This had prompted me to think of Mrs Glynn and my dear school matron before her. I had been a slave to both women and my animal passions. There hadn't been much thinking going on then.

-“Life is a journey in which one seeks wisdom and truth. The pursuit of knowledge is man's way of living the good life. Truth is virtue. Do you not see, Oliver?”

-“Yes, I think I do, Socrates. Maybe I will visit Athens after all.”

-“This, I think that would be the best place to start your journey,” concluded Socrates.

Later events that night are hazy. I am sure Socrates cracked open another bottle of *ouzo*. However, I don't remember leaving *The Kozmoz* or the walk back to *Sussex Gardens*. On waking bleary eyed other more pressing thoughts had been on my mind than how I had got back to the hotel. The symbolic dream experienced that night had been a graphic ordeal; the vivid portent featuring Barney Bear, Mrs Glynn and Socrates felt like a profound foreboding of my destiny. Stumbling and groping towards the entrance of the cave, the light

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growing unbearably brighter, I had awoken in *Sussex Gardens* with a jolt; the dream frozen in time, an indelible vision in the memory. The rising sun had

pierced a hole through the orange polyester drapes of the cut price hotel forcing me to shield my eyes and roll over into the semi-darkness away from the light.

Despite a world class hangover I knew exactly what I was going to do. My anus was sore, which I put down to the richness of the beef *stifado*, and I had gravel rash on my elbows and palms, yet I was devoid of self pity and resolutely set on a course of action. There was a regular connecting shuttle from Paddington to Heathrow and from there I would catch an afternoon flight to Athens, the birthplace of Western civilization.

The white knuckle taxi ride into the city was frightening. I tried as best I could to not think of imminent death as the yellow cab weaved in and out of traffic at breakneck speed. My driver (Pol was his name), cursed and swore in guttural Greek as he chain smoked filthy cheap cigarettes and fiddled with the radio dial. Wooden beads banged against the rear view mirror as the car violently lurched forward or breaks were desperately applied to avoid another vehicle or kamikaze moped rider. I vividly remember focusing on the back of Pol's broad sun tanned neck and the overheating fare meter in a state of mute terror. He had his destination and was clearly not the type who engaged in polite conversation. I had asked for *Omonia Square* at the suggestion of Socrates and the grumpy Greek had grunted his assent. Disconcertingly he was wearing a black eye patch, a highway buccaneer driving without fear in this mad world of motorway derring-do.

The night time flight over a floodlit *Acropolis* had been spectacular; the plane descending and banking to afford the best view of this world heritage site. I just wanted to live a little longer in order to savour the recollection as the cab radio finally tuned into an annoyingly catchy refrain. It was a disco version of the Muslim call to prayer; Cyclops Pol humming along to the techno-wail in the style of an Eastern Mediterranean schizophrenic experiencing anti-psychotic side effects. I rummaged for the paperback book that had been

placed in my jacket pocket the night before. Socrates had gifted me a

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well worn edition entitled *The Great Philosophers* (on the first page of which was written, *Continental Hotel, Omonia Square – Dimitri*). The waiter had talked about me going on a journey of discovery like Homer's description of Ulysses and his adventures. Now something that Socrates the waiter had said came to mind: -"The more one knows the less one knows." Was the maxim a pretentious platitude or paradoxically profound? I was keeping an open mind on my erudite pal Socrates.

Careering off the motorway Pol was forced to slow down by traffic in the outskirts of the city. For the first time in twenty minutes I felt brave enough to look out of the side window at this birthplace of philosophy, mathematics and the arts. I gazed at the impressively illuminated old buildings in awe as the driver silently farted a rich vaporous stew of lamb and garlic with a hint of oregano. Screeching to a halt in a bustling square which I guessed must be *Omonia*, a word redolent of toilet bleach, the driver alighted and my bag was unceremoniously retrieved from the trunk and plonked on the pavement. The cyclops snatched the proffered *40 euros* from my hand and without giving change got back in his hell car and sped off. He was

impertinent and I was angry but I didn't want Pol to die blinded and mangled in an automobile pile-up. The way he drove I could be his last passenger. I didn't need that bad karma on my conscience. His family might even blame me and curse the Englishman who had lured their beloved Pol down that dark fateful highway.

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-“You are German, I think,” was her opening gambit.

I turned to my inquisitor and was taken aback by her appearance. She was a dark haired lady of the night, that much was obvious, but also a woman who could have been Trudie's exotic sibling. All around was the circling cacophony of honking traffic, drivers pulling over to talk to the girls, competing with the noisy chatter from street cafes and the plethora of bars. I had to strain hard to hear her sales pitch.

-“You are mistaken. I am English.”

-“Ah, English. An Englishman abroad,” she replied.

My first thought was, is she a woman?

-“Would you like a good time, Mister English gentleman?”

I knew what she meant and I was tempted, for one to establish her gender identity, and two because Trudie hadn't charged me anything in *Sussex Gardens* and I felt that I owed the oldest profession some recompense.

But I first needed to find and check in to *The Continental*.

-“I would like a good time but not right now. I have to find my hotel and unpack. I have had a tiring journey.”

-“What is your hotel?”

-“*The Continental*.”

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-“*The Continental!*” she laughed. -“Maybe I will see you sooner than you think.”

Before I had time to ask for some kind of clarification of her remark she had pointed across the square at a ramshackle poorly lit five story building and was turning on her heels.

-“There is *The Continental*.”

-“Thank you, madam,” I replied.

-“My name is Calypso,” she added over her shoulder.

-“Thank you, Calypso. Your name is beautiful.”

-“Thank you, Mister English, but now I must leave you. I am a busy woman.”

I nodded and set off in the direction of *The Continental*, the hotel recommended to me by Socrates, the anti-materialist.

If Calypso was Trudie's half sister then Dimitri was Oldrich's full brother; the resemblance uncanny with the same way of smoking a cigarette left dangling from the bottom lip, and the identical world weary features. Dimitri was slumped over the reception desk reading an old paperback. Such was the similarity I was prompted to say something.

-“Hello, I would like a room for a week. Socrates in Bayswater, London recommended you. You also know Oldrich in *Sussex Gardens*, I think.”

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Dimitri put down his book and stubbed out the cigarette on the floor behind the counter.

-“What are you talking about? I do not know a Socrates apart from the one who lived two and a half thousand years ago and a Brazilian midfielder from the *1982 World Cup*, and Oldrich you say?”

-“Yes, Oldrich.”

-“Never heard of him. You still want a room?”

-“Yes, for a week.”

-“That is *50 euros* a night. You pay in advance. Then I will change the sheets every other day. You still want?”

-“Yes, that will be fine, Dimitri.”

-“How you know my name?”

-“Call it an educated guess.”

-“You are funny man, Mister English.”

-“Yes, we are known for our wit.”

-“You still want room, funny man?”

Dimitri wasn't laughing and I was too tired to haggle or find another hotel. Feeling slightly irritated I was also confused by Dimitri's ignorance of Socrates and his *doppelganger* Oldrich. If I had inspected the room before payment I would have looked for

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alternative accommodation. Yet I was still harbouring the probably mistaken view that *The Continental* had the *bone fide* endorsement of a certain Greek waiter and that maybe the place would grow on me despite first impressions.

The room was on the top floor accessed by a winding steep narrow staircase oddly illuminated with low wattage red light. *Room 51* was at the end of the final corridor. Dimitri had given me a key attached to a fluorescent plastic float about six inches in length and

weighing at least a pound which seemed oddly cumbersome and unnecessary. Turning the key in the lock it soon became clear that accessing the room was not going to be straightforward. The bed was wedged tight up against the door in such a fashion that it only opened about a third of the way. Consequently I had to throw my bag in first and then turn sideways in order to wriggle through the crack. Once in I shut the door and fell on the bed, which occupied most of the room's floor space in the absence of any other furniture. I lay there motionless and looked up at the cracked flaking ceiling. There was no window and hence zero ventilation but I was exhausted.

In spite of the rock hard pillow I instantly fell asleep without the strength to undress or brush my teeth. My dream that night featured a murderous Dimitri smothering me with a pillow. It was a literal foreboding of asphyxiation and a desperate attempted wake-up call; the temperature in this life threatening cell cum sauna topping a hundred degrees at least with little or no air.

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After a fitful five or six hours of uncomfortable oblivion I was finally saved by the sound of a headboard banging loudly against the wall to my immediate left, a man's grunts and a woman's groans punctuating the stillness

of the early hours. Then as if to reinforce the message and stop me falling back to sleep a couple to my right struck up. Without their efforts, for which I am eternally grateful, I could well have perished, starved of oxygen, that night. There was no way that I could get through another similar night. If Dimitri couldn't supply an electrical fan I would buy one for myself that morning. With that plan in mind I glanced at my watch adjusted to local time. It was six o'clock in the morning and early but I needed to vacate my sweaty black hole of a prison.

Dimitri was elsewhere as I wedged my huge key in its *number 51* pigeon hole behind the desk and ventured out on to the waking streets. The bright sun was already up as I started to walk along the most promising avenue exiting *Omonia Square*. Several cafes were already open as groups of pedestrians made their way to work up and down the main thoroughfare only to disappear into a network of dark tributary alley ways. Still too early for the shops several street vendors were nevertheless setting up stalls, mainly bread and other ready to eat foods and snacks. I was enjoying the walk which was getting the travel stiffness out of my legs and didn't want to interrupt my progress towards a sign posted *Syntagma Square*. From my cursory research I knew this to be a rallying place for demonstrators and home to the country's parliament building. Coffee could

wait despite the enticing aroma emanating from the cafes but I did

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purchase two sesame covered bread donuts called *kelouri* for fifty cents. The *kelouri* man was a rum looking old cove with a deep mahogany tan and no teeth. He gratefully pouched my change and thanked me in German before spitting expertly on the sidewalk.

In my still tired and emotional state I felt an immediate affinity with Athens. It looked like a city with a bad hangover in need of a lick of paint and a good hosing down to dampen the rank smell of rotting garbage. The Greeks were cash strapped and facing an uncertain future and a glorious past wasn't going to pay the municipal bills or clear up its litter strewn streets. Up ahead I saw the *Acropolis* and the *Parthenon* perched majestically atop looming over the city. Commissioned by Pericles this eternal symbol of democracy was subsequently made a monument to more than one Roman emperor, the rocky citadel having at various times also fallen to Turkish and Venetian hordes eager to leave their imprint on history. Now it was my turn to climb the famous hill.

I negotiated the rising narrow side streets packed with souvenir shops and restaurants, pausing only to buy a Socrates T-shirt for *five euros* - the electric fan could wait until later. At the first publically decent opportunity

I threw away my old top and stretched into the new singlet, which sported a picture of the ugly bearded one etched on the front. I decided I would grow a beard myself and try on a new image; the element of reinvention that goes with any journey of self discovery seeming appropriate.

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Eventually the labyrinthine maze of back streets brought me to the foot of the *Acropolis* and the queues of tourists that were already forming at this still relatively early hour; mainly Americans and Japanese pilgrims laden with expensive looking cameras. It was eight thirty and the beginning of a beautiful sunny day with cloudless azure skies already stretching to the horizon and beyond. The *Acropolis* admission price was 25 euros which seemed a bit steep for a close up inspection of some marble columns and a panoramic view of the city. Plonking myself down on a public bench I got out my copy of *The Great Philosophers*. As I turned to the chapter on Plato a local tramp hobbled past. I don't know why but I offered him my spare *kelouri*, waving the donut in an enticing way. He smiled in acknowledgement and joined me on the bench. For a couple of minutes nothing was said as the man devoured the dry sesame covered roll. Wiping his

mouth with the back of a grimy sleeve and exhaling a grunt of appreciation he then turned to face me.

-“*Danke schon*,” he said.

-“*Ich bin ein Engländer*,” I replied in my pidgin German.

-“Good. I speak better English than German,” replied my new friend with a smile.

He introduced himself as Simon, a native of Athens and I told him my name. Judging by his dilapidated training shoes which were held together with elastic bands he wasn't *Simon the Cobbler*.

-“I like your T-shirt,” he remarked.

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I smiled in acknowledgement. If I had been carrying a spare I would have given it to him. Simon was wearing a threadbare smock with various splattered food stains overlapping in a fusion of kaleidoscopic colours; primary reds and yellows scatter dripped randomly on an already soiled grey canvas.

-“You like Socrates?” I asked.

-“Yes, he is my hero, the greatest of all philosophers who died for his beliefs.”

-“The unexamined life is not worth living and all that?”

-“Exactly my friend - I too am a philosopher.”

I was suddenly intrigued by this scruffy little man who I had stumbled on by chance.

-“What do you philosophize about, Simon?”

-“Everything, he replied.”

He must have discerned in my features a questioning look, and so elaborated.

-“Everything from Ethics, to Ontology and Epistemology.”

-“By that I take it you mean the consideration of moral questions and the nature of reality and what we can know,” I chipped in.

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I had read the Introduction to *The Great Philosophers* which mapped out the different areas of Philosophy. My rehashed summary made me sound cleverer than I actually was.

-“Yes, I think that you understand the important areas but let us not forget that there is also logic, the philosophy of science, the philosophy of mind, political philosophy, aesthetics and of course the philosophy of religion.”

Suddenly I felt out of my depth. Simon the tramp was a genius or doing a good impression of one. But wasn't

this what philosophy was all about; sitting on a bench with a Greek hobo talking about the very meaning of human existence on a fine sunny day with all the time in the world? I wished that we had a bottle of wine or two. Simon then noticed the opened book on my lap and picked it up.

-“*The Great Philosophers!*” he exclaimed.

Simon saw that the book was opened at the chapter headed *Plato*.

-“You have read Plato before?” he enquired.

-“Not in detail,” I replied.

-“Tell me what you know of Plato?”

I paused to gather my thoughts. An expensive *Cheltenham College* education had versed me in the classics and given me a rudimentary understanding of the subject.

-“Well, first of all Plato was the pupil of Socrates,” I began.

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-“That is correct,” nodded Simon.

-“And without Plato we would have no written record of Socrates,” I continued.

-“Yes, Socrates is used in Plato’s dialogues; the master challenging so called common sense by highlighting inconsistencies in accepted wisdom. Through a process of argumentation, Socratic dialogue, the truth or a nearer approximation to it is achieved. Greater understanding equates to greater wisdom,” summarized *Simon the Teacher*.

-“We discover knowledge that we didn’t realize that we already possessed?”

-“Exactly. The truth is revealed to us by stages; a truth we knew all along.”

-“I am not sure that I believe that bit,” I said.

-“Nor am I, but tell me more about Plato,” asked Simon.

I thought of my psychedelic dream in *Sussex Gardens*, of Barney Bear, and Mrs Glynn cavorting in a leather-padded grotto.

-“Plato uses the allegory of a cave to demonstrate the difficulty of philosophical enquiry,” I suggested distractedly.

-“Yes, appearances are like the shadows cast by a fire on to the walls of the cave. Reality lies beyond the shadows and can only be

accessed once one leaves the cave and is exposed to the light. True reality must exist in another eternal realm."

- "And ideals, the Forms exist in this eternal realm?" I offered eager to show off my limited knowledge of Plato.

- "Yes, perfect exemplars of beauty, truth, justice etc we only imperfectly experience in this world," added Simon.

- "It sounds religious?"

- "This has been said."

- "And elitist?"

- "I assume you are referring to man's limited access to the Forms?"

- "Yes, I mean only people versed in philosophy and of sufficient intelligence can see beyond shallow every day experience, right," I asked rhetorically.

- "Plato thinks that only those who show the greatest promise in recollecting the Forms, whether male or female, can become the philosopher-kings," explained Simon.

- "So Plato was quasi-mystical and elitist!"

-“Correct, Oliver but you must continue with your readings of Plato and Socrates and maybe become a philosopher-king yourself.”

-“But what of Aristotle?”

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I wanted to pump Simon for as much information as I could - it's not often one encounters such an erudite tramp willing to share his knowledge.

-“The tutor of Alexander was also a great philosopher. He disagreed with Plato's theory of the Forms. He affirmed that the material world around us is real and knowable. He is a realist,” smiled Simon.

-“You say *is*.”

-“His ideas live on. Think of the modern scientific enterprise.”

-“And his ideas are fundamentally more democratic than those of Plato,” I stated, playing devil's advocate.

-“He does not talk of philosopher-kings in the same way as Plato but as a master of logic he was still a champion of intellectual rigour. But now I must go in search of something else to eat.”

I took the hint and gave Simon a *ten euro* note for which he thanked me. As he started to walk away he paused and turned to face me.

-“If you had the power of invisibility how would you use that power?” he asked.

-“In a good way,” I lied.

In Manchester I would have used my cloak of invisibility to creep into the widow’s apartment unobserved. There I would have stayed for hours feasting my eyes upon the object of my obsession and lust, Mrs Glynn. Reading my mind Simon looked at me doubtfully.

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-“Not doing the right thing damages our souls. I am glad that you know this, Oliver.”

I smiled uneasily as Simon disappeared down a side street and gathered up my things. Twenty five *euros* admission to the *Acropolis* was too much to pay for any view unless one was talking of a view at *The Continental* (I would willingly have paid that supplement for a small window in *room 51*). Yet Simon the philosopher-king had taught me so much free of charge and I had to ration my spending given the unplanned nature of the journey ahead. Athens had been a good idea as a starting destination and I thanked Socrates. I smiled in satisfaction as I recalled the superb meal in *The Kozmoz* and turned my thoughts to my immediate bodily needs. It was time for lunch which was a much better way of spending *25 euros*.

Retracing my steps through the *Plaka* district I looked for a place to sit down and eat in quiet appreciation for the good life, soon finding a tavern with an outside table that served excellent food. Savouring the freshly made *moussaka*, in preference to the beef *stifado*, I poured myself another glass of decent red wine from a bottle that had a picture of *El Greco* on the label. It would have been the perfect alfresco lunch were it not for the irritating sound of inane chatter. I couldn't help but overhear the conversation of two obese American tourists seated on the next table.

-“This food tastes like crap, Nancy,” complained the husband who it turned out was called Bob.

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-“Oh honey, it's not too bad,” replied the wife in a conciliatory tone.

-“Why do they have to soak everything in oil, Nancy?”

-“It's supposed to be good for you, honey.”

-“Screw that. It's like wop food.”

-“Baby, try and eat it just for me,” Nancy implored.

-“Look, you talked me into visiting this third world toilet but I'll be damned if I am going to eat their swill.”

-“Okay honey, just drink the wine and we'll try and find a burger bar later on.”

-“Burger Bar! I haven’t seen a *Micky D’s* since we arrived.”

-“Honey you are making a scene.”

-“I don’t give a damn.”

-“What kind of country serves this crap and don’t get me started on the lack of air conditioning in the hotel.”

-“I know sugar, but don’t you think the old buildings are wonderful and this place has such a sense of history?”

-“I don’t trust ‘em, the Greeks. I never voted for that Dukakis fella.”

-“I know baby. We fly to Rome tomorrow and after that back to Florida and civilisation in only three days time. You will be back for baseball pre-season.”

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-“Can’t wait!” exclaimed a red faced Bob. -“I’ll be able to get a decent cold beer as well.”

-“Maybe Rome will have AC and better food,” said Nancy.

-“Yeah, right. No doubt it’ll be the same crock of bull shit. I don’t know why we bailed these deadbeats out in the war. This place sucks.”

-“Drink up and try not to get too worked up, baby. You know what the doc told you about your blood pressure.”

-“I know, right. Sometimes I think you brought me here to finish me off and get your hands on the life insurance and the condos.”

Nancy ignored Bob’s outrageous slur. She was clearly used to his bombast and didn’t rise to the bait.

-“I still need to buy some souvenirs for the folks back home, Bob. Mary Beth asked me to get her something typically Greek.”

-“Buy her a douche bag,” laughed Bob pleased with his own joke. -“That sums up this shit hole.”

Fat Bob arrogantly threw a hundred *euro* note on the table and sweating profusely rose laboriously with the elegance of a super tanker trying to change direction. With much disruption the couple proceeded to negotiate the tightly packed tables huffing and puffing from their exertions before finally waddling off down the street. I watched as oncoming pedestrians had to swerve into doorways in

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order to avoid the mammoth pair’s downhill progress. The waiter retrieved the note and started to clear the Americans’ table with a weary shake of his head. He turned to me and spoke.

-“I fucking hate Americans.”

I smiled in acknowledgement pleased that tranquillity had now been restored. Thirty minutes later I had paid my bill, a very satisfied customer, and walked back towards the Parliament Square passing the Americans *en route*. They were ensconced in another restaurant about a hundred yards down the road and judging by Bob's wild gesticulations he was still complaining.

Syntagma Square was now full of people and the Ministry of Funny Walks open for business. The tall ceremonial guards high kicked their way backwards and forwards dressed in what can only be described as camp ceremonial garb consisting of ornate tunics atop figure hugging white tights. Best of all though were the curly boots with bobbles on the toes and the black felt noddy caps, also accessorized with pom-poms. They were Greece's finest, but I couldn't help laughing disguising my uncontrolled mirth by simulating a coughing fit. As I shifted my gaze I noticed the multitude of cafes doing a brisk trade and the street vendors hawking their wares. I had paused to drink in the spectacle of this swirling human vortex, the hue and cry of the demos. The swarthy bloke who had earlier sold me two *kelouri* for fifty cents approached giving no indication of recognition. He made himself comfortable on an adjacent wooden bench before spitting on to the pavement. Mister *kelouri* was a good

four feet away but still reeked of rancid sweat and stale cigarette odour. He must have noticed my fidgeting presence and was prompted to speak.

-“You are German?”

I was momentarily taken aback by his faultless English. Athens appeared to be full of extremely competent linguists.

-“Um, no. I am English.”

He nodded sagely in acknowledgement as he lit himself a grubby looking cigarette, his body hunched over to shield the flame from a slight breeze that whipped across the square.

-“You are a tourist, I think?”

-“Yes, just for a few more days,” I replied.

-“I saw you earlier selling *kelouri*.”

-“Ah yes, I remember you now.”

-“Have you finished for the day?”

-“Yes, I only work in the mornings. My business partner works in the afternoons.”

-“It must be wonderful to live here. I envy you.”

-“If you are a tourist then this is indeed a wonderful place. But it is different if you are Greek.”

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-“Life is hard?”

-“Yes, it is now. Too many immigrants, from Syria and Albania. There is not enough work. I can barely survive.”

-“How do you manage?” I asked.

-“I share an apartment with my wife and live off coffee and *kelouri*, and cigarettes,” he smiled ironically before taking another drag. -“Where are you from?”

-“Manchester - it is in northern England.”

-“I know where it is. Manchester United, yes,” he replied.

-“You like football?” I asked.

-“I only watch on TV now but my team is *Olympiakos*. You like football?”

-“Um, not really.”

The *kelouri* man now looked at me as if I were some kind of freak.

-“Enjoy Athens my friend while you are here for such a short time. Stick to the tourist areas.”

-“Is Athens dangerous?”

-“It can be. There are many thieves and cutthroats.”

-“Pickpockets?” I asked picturing my companion as some kind of Aegean Fagin.

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-“There are many pickpockets my friend, on the streets and on buses. Watch your wallet at all times. Never let your guard down.”

-“Are there any particular areas I should avoid?”

-“Thieves are everywhere, especially at the airport and in *Omonia Square*,” he replied.

Cheers Socrates, I thought.

-“Even some of the police are imposters,” he continued.

-“Really?”

-“Yes, be careful not to hand your documents over to a fake policeman.”

-“My God! That is worrying,” I exclaimed.

-“Yes I know. Sometimes these fake policemen are pimps controlling the girls.”

-“Don’t tell me. In *Omonia Square*?”

-“Yes. That is the headquarters for their operations.”

Mister *kelouri* got up to leave and stubbed out the remains of his cigarette with his heel. He spat brown

phlegm copiously and with accurate control before speaking.

-“Nice to meet you. Take care and avoid *Omonia Square*.”

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-“Thanks for the advice,” I replied impersonally not knowing his name.

I don't know why but I hadn't the heart to tell him about *The Continental*. Ignorance is bliss goes the cliché and I didn't need any third party horror stories about the hotel adding to my already unfavourable assessment. I had paid a week in advance for room 51 and was determined to get my money's worth in this stimulating, albeit rough, meet and greet playground. Simon the philosopher-king, the fat Yanks, and now Mister *kelouri* had crossed my path and it was still only early afternoon. People came to you in this city if you stood still for a moment or sat down. But right then for reasons of survival I had to find an electrical shop and purchase a fan and after that head for *Omonia Square*. It had been a long day and I fancied a few drinks near to home.

Finding a free table outside the most reputable looking bar on offer I parked up with my new purchase and slid it under the table. The soviet designed fan had cost a

bit more than I had planned at fifty *euros*. It was old fashioned and bulky but at least might help me survive the night, I tried to justify to myself. A surly waiter soon worked out that I wanted ouzo and kept my glass refilled without me having to ask. As the bill mounted his mood improved and I was treated to a smile of manly acknowledgment after the fifth glass. Night time had fallen and the girls were out in force. I hoped that Calypso would make an appearance being eager to build on my Trudie experience. I wanted to sleep with an authentic woman with

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female *DNA* and money was no object. Ideally we could negotiate a fee that would retain her services overnight. Unfortunately three hours passed and she didn't show. Dejectedly I paid up and headed for *The Continental* ignoring the advances of other girls as I went. Number two had to be Calypso - the dark haired beauty was irresistible.

Dimitri bade me a good evening as I staggered into the hotel foyer, grinning as he handed me the heavy float key. I smiled drunkenly and headed for the formidable stairwell ascent which I negotiated after stopping a couple of times for a breather. Thankfully I didn't have the fan in tow as I had given it to the barman across the square. On the third floor I had been tempted to fall

asleep on the carpet but dogged determination eventually got me to *room 51*. As usual the door only opened about a third of the way and so bouncing off the door frame I sidled my way awkwardly through the gap. To my surprise the light was on and I had a visitor. Calypso was nonchalantly sat up in bed reading a magazine while a modern looking fan on an upright stand whirred away in the corner of the room. She dropped the glossy journal and smiled as I fell on to the bed by her side.

-“What are you doing here?” I slurred.

-“Dimitri let me in when I told him you are my friend. I hope you don’t mind,” she replied.

-“How much?” I asked getting straight to the point.

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-“For you special price - it is one hundred and fifty *euros* for the night.”

I handed her my wallet and then after a brief bout of frenetic fumbling passed out, my one recollection being how small and dainty her hands and feet were.

In the morning Calypso was gone but at least she had left my credit cards, phone and passport, although my wallet was rinsed of cash. The stolen money made up my mind. It was time to leave Athens and continue on

my journey. Simon the philosopher king had referred to Plato's mysticism and quasi-religious philosophy. I have never been a religious man but I needed to know more about religious beliefs so that I could reject their arguments with cold irrefutable logic. The next stage in my voyage of self discovery meant a trip either to Jerusalem or Rome. I didn't fancy the hassle of being grilled by Israeli security agents at *Ben Gurion* so I plumped for the *Eternal City* - there were daily flights to Rome from Athens. I just hoped that I didn't get Pol the cyclops driving my taxi to the airport (though I hoped he was still alive) as my nerves were already frayed at the edges. Checking out of *The Continental* I handed Dimitri a note addressed to Calypso. In it I thanked her for a wonderful night (from the little I could remember), wished her well, and briefly explained my reasons for the Rome trip. Dimitri then surprised me with what he said next.

-“I told Calypso to leave you alone.”

-“I beg your pardon?” I asked confused by his comment.

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-“Oldrich phoned me from London. He said that you are good man so I tell Calypso to go. She wanted to stay with you forever. I say no, you must leave the Englishman, Calypso. So she go,” explained Dimitri.

-“So you do know Oldrich in *Sussex Gardens*!” I exclaimed.

-“Yes, Oldrich is my brother,” replied Dimitri casually.

-“Then why didn’t you admit that when I first arrived?” I asked.

- “I not know you. You could be *KGB*, my friend,” he replied.

-“I thought that Calypso was very nice,” I said.

-“If you have money then Calypso is very nice woman. You have good time. Now is time to go,” replied Dimitri.

-“I suppose that I should thank you then in that case,” I suggested.

-“No need, Englishman. Have a safe journey,” responded Dimitri.

-“Will you give her my letter?” I asked one last favour.

Dimitri nodded his assent.

-“Next time I see Calypso I give her letter. She gets lots of fan mail.”

We shook hands and I walked out of *The Continental* wearing a rueful smile thinking of Calypso, grateful for the experience but also feeling lucky to have escaped her irresistible charms. Yet my sense of relief was

tinged with a trace of regret. I knew that Calypso's
enchanted

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room 51 cave would not be empty for long and I envied
the prospective occupant.

Roma:

In the end it wasn't the journey to the terminal that proved terminal; Pol the cyclops was having a day off and the twenty mile drive from the city was uneventful. Ironically it was the routine connecting flight from Athens to Rome that nearly ended this story prematurely.

The economy class experience had started predictably enough with a just about bearable level of discomfort. I was wedged up against the fuselage wall by an overweight priest sat in the seat to my immediate right. The flight was scheduled for just over an hour so sitting back with a gin and tonic I had felt relaxed enough to look back on recent events with a good deal of satisfaction. As I smugly glanced out of the window at the glistening blue Mediterranean thirty thousand feet down below all had seemed right with the world – I should have known better. Something happened up in the heavens that demonstrated my fragile mortality, but let me put those events temporarily on hold for dramatic purposes. First it was the priest, who could have been a stunt double for a very famous operatic tenor, who broke the silence.

-“You are English, sir?” Pavarotti had heard me order my drink. He had opted for a glass of house red, the blood of Christ.

-“Yes. Yes I am,” I replied.

-“Is it your first visit to Rome?” he asked.

-“Yes.”

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-“Business or pleasure?”

-“A bit of both.” I felt like I was at confession.

-“What is it you do?”

-“I am a writer,” I lied.

-“Published?”

-“Yes,” I lied again.

My inquisitor didn’t press me for further details on titles and publishers though in such an event I could have sounded plausible, being well versed in impromptu dissimulation. I also had a double first in bull shit and a doctorate in obfuscation for backup.

-“You are staying in Rome?”

-“For a while, maybe three or four days.”

-“Where are you staying?”

-“I haven’t decided yet,” I said trying to sound free spirited.

-“That might be a problem. Accommodation is difficult to find at this time of year.”

-“I am sure I will find somewhere.”

The priest had shaken his head doubtfully and then smiled.

-“You are in Rome for research purposes?”

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-“Exactly,” I replied with a terseness that suggested finality and the end of the conversation. I mimed a yawn and tried my best to look worn out.

-“You will have to excuse me, Father. I am feeling very tired,” I explained eager for his probing to end.

-“Rest my son. I know how exhausting Athens can be.”

Too true, I thought, wondering if the priest knew Calypso.

As I tried to settle down I could hear the irritating sound of the priest opening and starting to munch his way through an economy size packet of potato crisps. Resolutely keeping my eyes shut, the dark redness of the inside of my eyelids looking like the night sky as little spots of white light flitted to and fro mimicking the trajectory of comets, Pavarotti relentlessly lip smacked

and crunched his way through a mountain of fried oily spuds...

For clarification let me admit that my story is primarily concerned with a sexual obsession that has dominated my life since puberty. Teenage lust in all its exciting detail and freshness was resurrected shortly after moving into *The Grange*. Ensconced in a leafy suburb of Manchester the neat two-bedroom flat had offered comfort, privacy and location. Unfortunately it didn't take long for me to regret my purchase; that first sighting of Mrs Glynn awakening repressed memories of my beloved school matron...

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The plane pitched and plummeted on a thermal and I slowly opened my left eye to look out at the wing. For a brief second I thought that I saw a blackbird, or maybe a raven, perched nonchalantly on the aerofoil. When I looked again having rubbed my eyes it had gone... The first time I passed the widow in the building's vestibule my stomach had churned uncontrollably like that of a love struck virgin and hence forward Mrs Glynn became my sole obsession. I found out from another neighbour that the lady had been married for many years but now lived alone in flat 1. She had a reputation for being quite posh and was nicknamed *Lady Penelope* by the gardeners...

I cautiously opened my left eye again but the black bird was definitely gone.

-“Get a grip, man,” I muttered to myself.

Unbelievably Pavarotti was now glugging on a flagon of cola and gasping in child like appreciation after each lengthy swig...

Much to my chagrin Mrs Glynn was a respectable God fearing woman who raised money for local charities. I had looked up her profile on the internet and unearthed an unimpeachable reputation as well as a photograph taken at a charity raising event which I cropped, enlarged and then framed. To traduce Mrs Glynn in my novel had said far more about my repressed sexual desires than anything else and I still feel terribly guilty about her fictional representation. With the benefit of hindsight the story should only have featured one lustful female; the eponymous and fictitious Judith though even she was

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sadly based on a younger version of Mrs Glynn...

I was still awake and could now hear the fat priest eating what I guessed was a crusty baguette stuffed with smelly blue cheese, judging by the powerful aroma...

My father was wealthy and my teenage years were spent crossing off the days to the time when I would legally inherit his money held in trust...

The intercom engaged and the pilot said something in Italian which I didn't fully understand. I guessed that it was an apology for the turbulence...

Prior to Mrs Glynn there had only been one other woman, Mrs Flynn. She was the school matron at the Cheltenham boarder. A small cut on the finger would necessitate a band aid; a grazed knee the application of anti-septic rubbed in adroitly by the medically trained former nurse. My fledgling admiration for Mrs Flynn coincided with a fervent sexual awakening. Forever I would associate sexual fulfilment with mature women of a respectable and sober disposition...

Pavarotti, an unwelcome and increasingly irritating distraction, shifted his bulk and accidentally poked me in the ribs with his fat elbow. I continued to feign sleep...

Years later the sight of Mrs Glynn in the hallway of *The Grange* had made me think of Mrs Flynn and the unparalleled ecstasy of my first

seminal experience, remembering my breathlessness and racing heart as my body had taken complete control and subjugated a servile consciousness...

I considered my immediate neighbour afresh, notwithstanding his gluttony which is a deadly sin, the bloody hypocrite. Maybe he wasn't as stupid as he looked. If you didn't fancy women the priesthood was a cushy little sinecure; free bed and board and lots of respect from complete strangers. As if on cue the uncouth priest chose that moment to belch very loudly...

My father had left me a couple of million pounds, once various properties and shares got sold off, and I had bought the apartment in *The Grange*, happy with my pornographic web sites, my books, and financial independence. Everything had been hunky dory until I became aware of Mrs Glynn and started to suffer sleepless nights. Mrs Glynn dressed as matron would always egg me on in my fitful snatched dreams with her words full of encouragement: -"That's it, Oliver. That's a good boy. See, that wasn't so bad after all. Let me kiss it better now"...

- "Did you say something, my son?" asked the priest, snapping me from my reverie.

- Shit, I thought. Was I talking out loud? I didn't reply to Pavarotti feigning a sleepy sounding grunt...

Inevitably the tried and tested images of Mrs Glynn and vintage recollections of Mrs Flynn from my personal archive began to lose

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their potency. Yet I always had my go-to prop, my visual ohm; the framed photograph of Mrs Glynn sat proudly on my desk which was always ready to hand. Suddenly aware that I was getting an erection, a chub-on, I shifted in my seat and turned away from the priest and back through the mists of time...

Following the death of Flynn my friend and mentor I had decided to leave *The Grange*. The keys of the property were entrusted to rental agents and I moved down to London which is where this tale began in *Sussex Gardens*. I was avoiding an ignominious exit or worse a charge of indecent assault. The only sensible option involved moving two hundred miles south at least for the next few months. There had been no last minute change of heart despite a part of me not wanting to completely rule out the possibility of a return to *The Grange*, one day...

I was stirred from my reverie by a deliberately forceful nudge in the arm from Pavarotti which couldn't be ignored. As I opened my eyes I noticed that the stewardesses were serving the in-flight meal...

-“You must eat my son,” proclaimed the priest in his deep sonorous voice.

Luckily my throbbing tumescence was subsiding. I gingerly lowered the plastic green tray as the pouting stewardess passed me the packaged meal across the priest’s expansive belly. It looked like some kind of, pasta, beef and dessert three-course offering. The young

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beauty poured me a black coffee as I offered her my plastic cup. Pavarotti was already making light work of his main while I picked at the cold spaghetti. The gourmand priest noticed my lack of enthusiasm.

-“You don’t like spaghetti, my son?”

-“Would you like it?” I asked, gesturing to my untouched starter. Pavarotti licked his lips in anticipation and reached over.

-“God bless you. It is a sin to waste good food.”

No danger of that with you around, I thought, smiling in acknowledgement and peeling back the plastic wrapper on the hot steaming beef. On principle I was determined to keep my fat bastard friend’s holy snout out of this particular trough. The meat was tough and difficult to cut but I forked a piece and swallowed it

whole. That was when my problems started; the globule of gristly rubber wedging itself in my trachea. At first I tried coughing and mild retching in an attempt to dislodge the offending lump. Initial mild amusement and then embarrassment at the absurdity of my predicament was soon replaced by panic. I was going to die and everyone on the plane including Pavarotti, especially Pavarotti, were oblivious. I rose from my seat with difficulty given the lack of room and tried to vomit by placing my fingers down my throat.

-“Really, my son. The food isn’t that bad,” had joked the priest.

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I had pointed to my throat and tried to communicate to *Friar Tuck* that I was in serious trouble. Finally he twigged, the best possible news. The bad news was his sheer immobility. On the verge of losing consciousness I managed to scramble over the Italian man-mountain and fall gasping into the aisle. If I could have I would have laughed at the absurdity of dying on my back at *30,000 feet* in a pressurized metal tube. The next few seconds are vague. I remember being lifted on to my feet by someone extremely strong; manly arms locked around my torso as I felt the weight of his large body wedged up against my back....and then coughing and the relief at seeing an undigested grey projectile of beef

arcing down the aisle and bouncing off a stewardess's shiny shoe. I was alive.

-“You are back with us, my son,” announced the priest unlocking his life saving embrace.

-“Thank you,” I spluttered.

As I resumed my seat the aircrew made a fuss and brought bottled water. I assured everyone that I was now alright and people soon settled down again in the wake of my mini-crisis. Pavarotti had saved my life and I needed to thank him.

-“Thank you Father, for saving me.”

-“Don’t thank me, thank God my son,” he replied smiling.

-“But it was your actions that saved the day.”

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-“True, I executed the *Heimlich manoeuvre*, but it was God who placed me by your side. The Lord has plans for you, my son.”

-“Thank you,” I repeated not wishing to sound churlish and resisting the temptation to deliver a devastating atheistic critique of his faith.

The rest of the flight was uneventful and as the plane taxied to a halt at *Rome International* I addressed my thoughts to the issue of where I would be staying that night. Pavarotti turned to me and spoke.

-“How long are you staying in Rome, my son?”

-“A few days,” I replied.

-“I would like to speak with you, perhaps over a meal?”

The priest handed me his card with name and address embossed in gold leaf: *Ignatius Salvatori, St Peter's Basilica, The Vatican, Rome.*

I had to admit that I was impressed and the man had saved my life.

-“What about tomorrow, lunchtime?” I suggested.

-“Excellent, meet me at the entrance to the basilica, and raise your arms in the air so that I can pick you out in the crowd. -“Say 1pm?”

-“1pm at the entrance to the basilica,” I confirmed.

Once off the plane and through into baggage reclaim I lost sight of Ignatius. The priest had suggested that I should take a cab to the main railway terminus and look for a hotel in that immediate area. My first time in Rome it sounded as good a plan as any. Eventually,

having tramped the streets for two hours and covered several miles with my burdensome suitcase I gratefully found a room for two nights in an overpriced 4-star hotel on the *Via Cavour*, a stone's throw from *The Colosseum* and only a mile or so from the rail terminus. It was early evening and freshly showered and changed I decided to settle down for the night and postpone my sight-seeing until the morning. I poured myself a scotch from the mini-bar and lay back on the double bed with my copy of *The Great Philosophers*. If I was meeting Ignatius Salvatori the following day then I wanted to bone up on the philosophy of religion and I already had one or two questions that I wanted to ask my heavyweight saviour over a plate of pasta. The basic tenets of religious thought from Augustine to Aquinas seemed straightforward enough and to my mind consistently indefensible. After a couple of hours of cursory research I was now satisfied that I would be able to give Ignatius a run for his money in the discourse stakes. I turned my attention to a tourist guide of Rome which had been left in the room and proved to be surprisingly informative.

As I slept fitfully that night I dreamt of a one eyed Greek chauffeur trying to kill me by deliberately veering off a long straight road that went on for miles and only vanished in the extreme far distance. Then the scene violently shifted and I was in bed making passionate love to Calypso while Ignatius Salvatori drove a large

black bird from the room with his huge bear like arms, shouting, “be gone Satan, be gone!”

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Perhaps I shouldn't have had that second and then the third and fourth single malts from the mini-bar. The next morning I woke up in drenched sheets at 6am having copiously pissed the bed. In a state of panic my reflex reaction was to hang the sheets out of the fifth floor hotel window in an attempt to dry the wet linen; a brainwave that soon proved to be a compounding mistake, dark soot from the top of the lowered window sash leaving two thick black lines across the once pristine white bottom sheet. It was only by creeping into the corridor and stealing fresh sheets off a cleaner's laundry carriage (I could hear the char lady singing in Italian as she made a bed in a neighbouring room) that I had managed to salvage the situation. The soiled blackened articles were bundled up and thrown into the bottom of the wardrobe and placed under my suitcase, where they remained thankfully undiscovered for the duration of my stay. Crisis averted I had ordered room service and heartily enjoyed the continental breakfast on offer. After showering and changing for the second time in less than twelve hours I descended to the ground floor vestibule feeling suitably refreshed and walked out of the hotel in the direction of *The Colosseum*. The meeting with Ignatius Salvatori wasn't until 1pm and I was looking forward to the prospect of a

morning spent aimlessly ambling around this beautiful city, starting with the most famous ancient amphitheatre in the world. The top of *The Colosseum's* outer curved walls could be seen towering over a row of unprepossessing grey buildings that lined an equally unremarkable dirty little side street.

-“Two euros for a photograph, sir,” demanded the camp centurion.

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-“No thanks,” I replied.

The plastic Roman waved his plastic sword at me in mock menace before lapsing into fluent Japanese for the benefit of his next target, a group of oriental camera snapping visitors. I moved away as *Ludicrus Maximus* attempted to explain the etiquette of tourist photography to the oriental delegation. Resisting the admission fee, which seemed unnecessarily extortionate, I opted to walk the perimeter of *The Colosseum* free of charge. Besides, one could see through gaps in the perimeter bars to the inner arena and the excavated chambers; it was easy enough to imagine where the lions, tigers and Christians were billeted prior to the bloody imperial games.

More ancient ruins, a government building with the biggest national flag I have ever seen, and then numerous architectural treasures en route which the

native Romans appeared to take for granted. In any other city a plethora of hidden churches and statues that would have been venerated didn't even feature in the city's official tourist guide, the eternal city being awash with such an abundance of beauty that the populace seemed desensitized to its splendour. A haughty proud people Romans nevertheless know only too well how to make money out of the millions of visiting pilgrims. Rome, I soon learned, was an expensive city. As I sipped my twelve euro espresso outside a cafe with a view of *The Pantheon*, Mascagni's *Cavaleria Rusticana* played over a public sound system; the pain of the eye watering bill

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assuaged by the splendour of the square replete with its bustling humanity.

After a forty five minute wait in line outside the basilica I gained admittance and intermittently started to wave my arms in the air like a madman. At 2pm Ignatius spotted me and gestured through the crowd assembled by the entrance to the *Sistine Chapel*. Escorted by two pikestaff bearing Swiss guards my fat friend made stately progress through the gathered throng and once at my side dismissed his protectors.

-“Thank you gentlemen. I can take it from here.”

The impressive soldiers nodded their assent, clicked heels, and about turned. Clearly Ignatius Salvatori was a big cheese in the Roman Catholic Church.

-“Follow me, Oliver,” he commanded.

Within a surprisingly short period of time we were back on the bridge traversing the Tiber and heading back into the city centre.

-“I know a nice little *trattoria*,” said Ignatius as we negotiated a series of unpromising looking back streets, ending up outside a discrete canopied doorway next to a large blacked out window front devoid of any signage.

-“This is a restaurant for local people, not the tourists,” smiled Ignatius.

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-“Is it good?” I asked unthinkingly.

-“The best in Rome,” replied Ignatius.

On entering the darkness of this cave like establishment we were promptly greeted by a smart looking waiter dressed in the standard livery of starched white shirt and black trousers.

-“Signor Salvatori, welcome. Your usual table?”

-“Si, Marco and a place also set for my friend Oliver.”

Marco bowed and led us to a discrete table set back in a corner alcove. Lighting a candle he allowed us both to sit before quickly arranging the cutlery and napkins. Menus were produced and Marco retreated to the shadows shortly returning with a carafe of red wine. He poured a small measure in Ignatius's glass for his approval. The priest tasted the wine and nodded his assent.

-“This *Chianti Classico* is excellent today, Marco,” said Ignatius.

-“Grazie,” replied the waiter in appreciation of the priest's assessment.

Now sat face to face and alone Ignatius filled my glass and stared at me candidly.

-“As this is a special occasion and I have an intimate knowledge of the menu I hope that you will allow me to order your food, Oliver.”

-“Of course,” I nodded.

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What followed can only be described as a sumptuous repast. After a cursory blessing we began with a starter of minestrone soup, freshly baked garlic bread, and a main of meat balls and spaghetti. Before starting on a second helping of meatballs Ignatius took an overdue breather in order to speak.

-“You like the food?”

-“It’s better than the beef on the plane,” I replied.

-“Si, Oliver, Si!” exclaimed Ignatius.

For a moment I thought that my guffawing fat friend was going to choke on his food such was the violence of his uncontrolled mirth, but after a mouthful of red and the deft use of a napkin he regained his composure. Food might one day be the death of Ignatius Salvatori but it would take years rather than minutes.

-“You still don’t believe in God, Oliver?”

-“These meatballs are superb,” I replied evasively.

-“Oliver, answer the question.” Ignatius Salvatori was not a man to be fobbed off.

-“I respect you and your beliefs Ignatius but I personally do not believe in God,” I replied trying to sound as diplomatic as possible.

-“Why do you lack faith, my son? Embrace the Lord and all your inner torments will fade away. I can see that you are a man who has a huge void in his life.”

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I didn’t want to get personal and tell this relative stranger about Mrs Glynn and my quest for life’s answers; besides, turning to God seemed too easy and a bit of a cop out at this stage of my life. Maybe I will

see the light at the end when I am on my death bed (just in case) but not now. I tried a logical riposte.

-“I find it hard to reconcile the degree of evil in the world with the existence of a benevolent, all seeing, all powerful force that you call God.”

-“Ah, that old chestnut, as you English say. You sound like a man who has just read an introductory philosophy text.”

I laughed dismissively at this completely accurate statement.

-“Please answer my objection, Ignatius,” I blustered.

-“God created the world but gave man free will. The continued existence of evil in the world is due to man’s misuse of that will,” stated Ignatius.

I was reminded of *Jesuit John*, an old alkie who used to stand in a doorway opposite the *BBC* in Manchester. For the price of a can of strong cider he had always been willing to lecture on matters theological though he was less forthcoming when it came to the reasons for his own excommunication from the Church of Rome. Jesuit John had a measured forensic style; his catchphrase (“let counsel develop his argument”) could have been uttered with equal authority by Ignatius Salvatori. The priest could see that I wasn’t

convinced so in the spirit of *Alkie John* he started to develop his argument. You had to hand it to the Jesuit education system.

-“Evil is the result of man’s original sin. All humanity is seminally present in the loins of Adam,” declared Ignatius.

So Adam was the cause of my lust for Mrs Glynn, the bastard! It was a convenient explanation, but I wasn’t buying it. My loins were out of control but at the end of the day they were my loins which begged a question.

-“How is evil transmitted down through the generations; that claim needs some kind of biological explanation, an evil gene?” I countered.

-“Science cannot explain everything, my son,” he replied.

-“Ah that old chestnut, as we English say,” I quipped.

-“*Touche*, my son,” smiled Ignatius raising his glass in a mock toast.

I noticed that he addressed me as *my son* whenever he wanted to assert his dominance or he was on the back foot. Undeterred I went for the jugular.

-“Were there not natural disasters and diseases before man? If there were then humans can’t be blamed for those events!”

-“Before man earth was a paradise,” he replied.

-“Like the *Garden of Eden*?”

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-“Exactly, my son.”

I wasn't buying the *Garden of Eden* get-out-of-jail card either. Ignatius had started on his second plate of meatballs, now and again casting a sympathetic glance in my direction like an indulgent parent, as he troughed and supped. Unconvinced by his arguments I wasn't finished with the portly priest.

-“When I used the term evil just now I was referring to bad phenomena that happen in the world that have a physical material cause. It sounds like you talk of evil as some kind of supernatural force.”

I could see that I was stretching the big man's patience.

-“What you need to understand is that there exists both a heaven and a hell. Those who choose to accept the salvation of Jesus Christ will go to heaven. Do I have to spell out the fate of non-believers? Sin corrupts man and is the work of the devil. We require God's grace to give us moral guidance, my son,” continued Ignatius.

-“I understand your arguments though remain sceptical, Ignatius, as everything that you claim seems dependent

on some kind of divine revelation. Presumably the truth of what you say has been revealed to you?"

-“I commune with God through prayer it is true but the truth is also to be found in scripture.”

-“I do not see any proof of what you claim in scripture,” I said.

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-“You talk of proof. How can you prove that there is no God?” asked the priest.

-“The burden of proof is surely on you, Ignatius. I cannot disprove a negative. How can I prove that something that doesn’t exist doesn’t exist?”

-“You are a troubled man, Oliver. I hope that one day you will find God in your heart and salvation in his son on earth Jesus Christ. I will pray for you.”

-“I thank you for that consideration Ignatius, but in the meantime as I await my salvation I have to accept all the injustice that I see around me with the forbearance and patience of Job?”

-“Job was rewarded by God for not losing his faith.”

Ignatius resumed his meal with gusto and appeared untroubled by my atheism and the strength of my arguments. In due course the dessert arrived consisting of two huge bowls of pistachio ice cream. I couldn’t eat

mine so Ignatius helped me out. Afterwards more wine, a smorgasbord of local aromatic cheeses, and then dark Italian coffee. The conversation turned sedately and less contentiously to Rome and its glorious past.

-“Have you seen much of my beautiful city yet?”

-“*The Colosseum* and the *Pantheon* before I met you,” I replied.

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-“I also recommend the *Spanish Steps* and *Trevi Fountain*. And of course you must see the *Sistine Chapel*.”

-“The queues looked very long in the *Vatican*.”

-“It is worth the wait, my son.”

I knew from my tourist guide that Rome had been the Italian capital since 1871 but had an illustrious history that stretched back to ancient times. I had also watched *I Claudius* on TV.

-“They say that Rome gets its name from *King Romulus*,” smiled Ignatius.

-“And that *Romulus* was raised by wolves,” I added.

-“Do you think that plausible?” asked Ignatius.

-“I prefer an alternative myth.”

-“Which one?”

-“That Rome was founded by the Trojan refugee *Aeneas*.”

-“It sounds more likely than the wolf explanation,” nodded Ignatius. At last we were in agreement about something. -“In 380AD Christianity became the official religion of the Empire,” stated Ignatius. All the Popes are seen as successors to Peter.”

-“Do you know the Pope?” I asked.

-“I am dining with him this evening,” replied Ignatius casually.

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-“Impressive,” I managed to splutter.

-“He is just an ordinary man and the food will not be as good as here.”

-“Nevertheless, it is an impressive fact,” I replied.

Eventually the meal came to an end. I picked up the tab which I didn’t mind. It was my way of saying thank you.

-“Now Oliver I must take my leave. I hope you enjoyed the food and the company.”

-“Very much so,” I replied honestly.

-“Good luck with the rest of your journey I will pray for you.”

-“I think that I will be using trains from now on!”

-“Italian trains are very cheap if you don’t mind taking the slower service.”

-“I am in no rush,” I replied.

The priest shook my hand outside the restaurant, turned and commenced his stately stroll back towards the *Vatican*. As I watched him disappear into the crowd I felt slightly disappointed that I hadn’t been able to use my refutation of *St Anselm’s* ontological proof of God’s existence (if you don’t know it then look it up yourself), but was nevertheless struck by my own sense of wellbeing standing there on that Italian side-street in the afternoon sun. Seldom had I felt so

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physically healthy, care free and generally optimistic about the future as I did at that particular moment and it wasn’t all down to the huge meal, though that was part of the explanation. In the true stoical spirit of a latter day *Seneca*, I knew there was no point in regretting the past which was now out of my control. I had the rest of the day to explore the city and the rest of my life to find some kind of purpose. Short term the heavy philosophising could wait. Consulting my guide I headed for the *Trevi Fountain*; it is said that if you

throw a coin into the fountain then you will return to Rome.

The hundreds of submerged euros glinted in the sun. It seemed odd that there were no beggars wading in to scoop up this bounty. I pictured *Alkie John* diving into the pool of plenty head first. Yet Rome as I was to discover, for all its surface affluence, has more than its share of chronic need and desperation. I walked the city's streets and saw the sights that were omitted by the official tourist guide. Every historic artefact and magnificent edifice was matched by a homeless wretch asleep by a cash-point or an effeminate tout hawking bogus lottery tickets in a dimly lit alley way. While Ignatius Salvatori gorged himself in the finest restaurants long queues of the unwashed and starving formed at the rear of the *Vatican* impatient for their daily bowl of gratis soup.

The next few days in Rome passed without incident. I didn't bump into Ignatius and didn't I soil my hotel bed again. I ate too much pasta and ice cream in numerous restaurants yet managed to counter the machinations of dark beautiful waitresses who added fake charges on

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to bills; money for imaginary bread rolls, unconsumed wine, and outrageous taxes for the use of cutlery.

- "*Bruto stronzo*," they muttered under their breath as I pointed out their corrupt accounting, visibly offended by my ungenerous and punctilious sense of honesty. How dare a foreign tourist have the temerity to expose their *Machiavellian* schemes.

- "*Bruto stronzo*", indeed!

The slow train ride up the spine of a verdant Italy was picturesque and I watched it like a movie through the windows of half a dozen different carriages. Having traversed the central mountainous range of the country I stopped off in the Adriatic town of Rimini and sunbathed for a day on the sandy beach looking at beautiful young women and sipping martinis. There were no earthquakes to spoil my subsequent passage north and I arrived intact in Venice for an all too brief stop-over. Hiring a car from a well known international hire company I proceeded through the Alps via the luxury ski resort of Cortina and descended through the Bremer Pass and into Austria. The Tyrol landscape was spectacular and the air intoxicatingly sweet in its purity and I thought of Hitler and how this country fit for gods must have inspired his delusions of grandeur. Onward I drove towards a land that has boasted some of the finest ever thinkers in the history of philosophy. Onwards to Germany.

The Fatherland:

-“Would you mind turning off your engine and stepping out of the vehicle,” commanded the German customs guard in faultless English.

He was hanging on to my passport as he gestured to a colleague who approached with an excited sniffer dog straining at the leash.

-“If you tell me where the cocaine is hidden then we can all save ourselves a lot of inconvenience,” stated the *grippenfuhrer* not unreasonably.

I wanted to help but didn’t have the foggiest idea what he was talking about.

-“Cocaine? What cocaine?” I stuttered.

-“The cocaine that you are importing illegally into Germany, sir,” he replied.

-“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

I thought that I sounded convincing particularly in view of the fact that I was telling the truth.

- “Then why is the dog going crazy, sir?” he pointed at the car.

I turned to see the sniffer dog going ape shit in the back seat and shrugged my shoulders.

It was a no-win situation - the more I protested my innocence the more I sounded guilty, so I asked if I could make a call. Officer

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Heinrich checked my mobile contacts and then nodded his assent. As my hire car was taken apart piece by piece I phoned my letting agent in Manchester to find out if he had found a tenant for *The Grange*.

-“Hello, it’s Oliver Ross, phoning about my apartment in *The Grange*.”

The line wasn’t great but I could make out my agent’s voice at the other end. Meanwhile the *grippenfuhrer* was eavesdropping and I could tell by his smile that he thought I was using a pre-arranged code. Presumably *The Grange* was the name for the operation and the flat number referred to the quantity or stage on the journey though why I would use my real name I couldn’t fathom – perhaps it was part of an elaborate double bluff, the nuanced hallmark of a criminal mastermind. By now the engine had been removed by a mobile crane and the vehicle was propped up on bricks; all of the interior ripped out and thoroughly ransacked for contraband but they had still found nothing. Heinrich was becoming increasingly agitated.

-“Finish your call, sir,” he snapped.

Luckily I had enough time to be given details of my new tenant, a Mr Procci, an Italian language professor teaching at the University of Manchester on a one year contract. He had paid twelve months rent in advance plus a month's deposit. Pleased with the fact that at least something was going right I had hung up and handed the phone back to officer Heinrich.

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-“I will give you one last chance to tell me where the cocaine is,” he threatened. “Then, as you say, the gloves will come off.”

Eight hours later, with me being sat by the roadside for most of that time, Heinrich gave up. The car was put back together in a manner of speaking but not before I demanded a receipt for the search and took photographs of the damage. The hire car company could take their grievances up with the German government at a later date. *Grippenfuhrer* Heinrich addressed me for the last time.

-“You were lucky this time Mr Oliver, but next time we will catch you. I will make it my life's work to bring you to justice.”

-“*Auf wiedersehen*,” I replied with English civility, as I tooted farewell.

At least the horn was still functioning properly but it was scant consolation given Heinrich's stated antipathy.

The question foremost in my mind right then was why I had been targeted by the border police for such rigorous attention. I don't look particularly suspicious, I don't think, and it had been my first time through that particular border checkpoint. Perhaps the Italian hire car company had not cleaned the car properly after the previous user and he or she liked a joint or some other variant on the hemp based cigarette; the sniffer dog picking up a trace of the lingering smell. It seemed the likeliest and most plausible explanation short of going down the paranoid conspiracy route.

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Undeterred by the lengthy delay I drove north. Frankfurt or *Mainhattan*, the financial centre of Germany, had always been my intended destination. Situated on both sides of the Main and traversed by eight bridges, Frankfurt is an interesting mixture of the modern and the historic not that my mind was on late night sight-seeing. Eventually and with some relief I found a hotel in the historic old town, or *Altstadt*, north of the river a little distance away from the glittering glass and steel skyscrapers redolent of downtown New York. Returning the hire car had been an earlier ordeal culminating in a heated row with an officious

bureaucrat; the passive aggressive little *jobsworth* memorable only for a wispy blonde moustache and preposterous seventies style mullet.

-“But sir, the damages to the car are extensive. It was not in that condition when you hired the vehicle in Italy,” he had whined.

-“I know that but I was stopped and searched by your country’s customs service and I have the documentation to prove it,” I had replied in a tone of righteous indignation, handing over the magic paper signed by Heinrich.

-“I am not sure that this is acceptable. For all I know you *could* be a drug dealer. Our customs service would not stop and search your, sorry *our* car for no reason.”

-“Then phone the police right now and they will be able to confirm my story,” I had replied angrily calling his bluff.

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He wasn’t happy but was forced to accept the car in its damaged state. I had a feeling that this wouldn’t be the end of the matter but it was getting late and I was tired. My bluster had trumped his desire to extort compensation; his wish to avoid police involvement overriding his natural sadistic tendencies.

That night I showered and stayed in my hotel room with *The Great Philosophers*, a tourist guide of Frankfurt and a sense of *déjà vu*. As I tried to get to grips with the metaphysics of Kant, a name I imagined Barney Bear shouting in the street, the mini bar vied for my attention with the persuasive force of a categorical imperative. I poured myself a double gin and accepted my limitations - Immanuel Kant is a notoriously difficult read, being the first philosopher to try and bridge the gap between rationalism and empiricism. You had to be in the right mood for Kant so I was happy enough to just take on board a couple of his basic ideas:

- 1) *Treat humanity as an end in itself and not as a means to an end.*

I felt down with that maxim as I refilled my glass with a sense of entitlement and considered the likely damage to my bar tab in a selfish anti-utilitarian way. I had an intuitive estimate but wouldn't be sure until I saw it in writing on a verifiable invoice the next morning (the bar tab metaphor is an attempt to demonstrate the compatibility of rationalist and empirical approaches).

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Kant, who liked a drink himself, and must have been pissed when he formulated this ground breaker, also believed that:

2) *The mind creates the structure of experience
with time, space and causality being human
inventions.*

In other words if there were no people on earth then time, space and the idea of causality would not exist - quite mind blowing really. So I thought fuck it, fucking Kant. I put the great philosopher to bed, took another slug of booze, and picked up the user-friendly guide to Frankfurt; the assimilation of trivial information being more appealing.

To paraphrase: Frankfurt is the fifth largest city in Germany and is the country's ethnically and culturally diverse financial centre. Established by the Franks tribe (a rapacious band of brigands if ever there was one - it didn't say that bit) it was an important city in the *Holy Roman Empire*, today noted as much for its University and book fare as the head quarters of Deutsche Bank. Devastatingly the city's synagogues were destroyed by the Nazis and the medieval quarter virtually wiped out by allied bombers in World War II, but a lot of the old town has been rebuilt courtesy of Germany's post-war economic boom. Are you starting to get the picture? A troubled past but now an economically thriving modern metropolis.

Later that night I found myself in *Bahnhofsviertel* - the entertainment district by the railway station - not being

quite sure how I got there. I remember drunkenly
jostling through crowds of

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revellers and in and out of timber fronted bars that lined narrow streets in the *Romer* area, alarmed and yet excited by the novelty of caricatured faces; sturdy *frauleins* and grave moustachioed *bürgermeister*s. I think that I had a good time but can't say for certain. In the early hours the hotel porter had to let me in as I couldn't get my key to fit. I definitely remember that as well as the porter's name. I had written this intelligence on a piece of hotel stationery which read *Arthur* in scrawled handwriting. Arthur had guided me through the door and into the reception area, a feat made all the more remarkable because he had been cradling a dog at the same time, a pet poodle. Even in my inebriated state this had struck me as bizarre. The dog was called Neitzsche, which I had also written down on the bed side notepad though it was misspelt Nietsczhe.

Over the next few days I was able to enjoy several conversations with Arthur who acted as night-porter, early evening bar man, and general factotum for the hotel. On my second night he was serving me coffee in the hotel lounge as I was trying to get to grips with Kant again.

-“Ah, The Great Philosophers!” he exclaimed noting my book as Neitzsche, who was scurrying around the room,

simultaneously yelped in anthropomorphic approval. I nodded which prompted him to continue.

-“You like Kant?” he asked politely.

I wasn’t sure if he meant *cant* as in humbug or something worse and must have looked puzzled.

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-“*Immanuel Kant*, the transcendental idealist,” he clarified.

-“I wouldn’t profess to be an expert on *Kant* but I agree with some of his ideas,” I replied confidently, now that I understood his question.

-“You accept his distinction between the *phenomenal* and the *noumenal*?” probed Arthur.

- “Yes, I think that given the limitations of our sensory abilities we can only perceive the phenomenal world. There is a reality beyond our experience, the *noumenal*, that we will never be able to perceive.”

A business man sat on the other side of the lounge must have overheard this opening exchange and was, I noticed, shaking his head in contemptuous disbelief.

- “Bravo Englishman!” exclaimed Arthur.

His enthusiasm was genuine and I quickly ruled out sarcasm.

-“I take it that you agree?” I asked.

-“Of course! It is so refreshing to hear someone from a country of pragmatic shopkeepers to recognise Kant’s genius and the scope of his vision,” he replied scooping up Neitzsche into his arms.

I wondered if I was keeping Arthur from his chores but he seemed to be in no hurry.

-“Only when we listen to great music or stand before the best art do we get a glimpse of the *noumenal* which is eternal and transcends

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our limited three dimensional view of space and linear notions of time,” elaborated Arthur.

-“You mean great classical music and artistic masterpieces?”

-“I mean the music of Wagner and the art of Da Vinci, for example.”

Wagner, I thought. Hitler’s favourite. Was Arthur a Nazi? It was looking that way if stereotypes were anything to go by.

-“So, given our limitations as intelligent primates how should we conduct our lives, Arthur?” I asked assuming he accepted Darwinism with or without the *social* prefix.

-“One must accept that morality cannot be decided by any society or by logic. The only reason for our existence is to pass on our *DNA*. Therefore our continued survival and the will to stay alive is all that really matters. We are all motivated by our desires. Forget logic. Trust your intuition.”

Here I was on a journey of self discovery hoping to subjugate my passions through the acquisition of philosophical wisdom and a German waiter was now telling me to do the opposite. Arthur sounded more philosophy professor than hotel employee unless the German education system was absurdly superior to the one in the UK which I doubted, though I wasn't entirely ruling out the possibility.

-“I am impressed by your knowledge, Arthur?”

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-“You mean that you are impressed by the knowledge of a man who serves you drinks?”

-“Well, frankly, yes I am,” I replied.

Arthur stroked Nietzsche lovingly behind the ears, reminding me of a Bond villain, and smiled wisely as if he had been expecting the conversation to take this turn.

-“I have not always been a hotel lackey, Oliver. I come from a very wealthy Prussian family but I had to move away from my home town many years ago.” Arthur, a natural ham, had paused for dramatic effect. -“I got the family maid pregnant and brought shame on my family. There was never any question of my marrying the girl, but I was nevertheless exiled in disgrace and disinherited.”

I thought of my own self-imposed exile from Manchester and the cause of my flight, the ravishing widow Mrs Glynn. At least I had a few quid and didn't have to work as a domestic.

-“Have you a woman in your life now?” I asked, deflecting my attention back on to Arthur.

-“Sometimes I pay for a prostitute but *no* is the answer to your question. Women are meant to obey and there are very few who will accept that natural order of affairs in these decadent times that we live.”

Arthur was definitely an unreconstructed Nazi but I decided to keep the conversation on an apolitical footing and not challenge his

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outmoded sexism, especially as my knowledge of women was so limited and perhaps biased. From my own experience both Trudie and Calypso had called the shots, coming after my poodle-like devotion to matron

and latterly Mrs Glynn. Maybe that was why Arthur doted on Nietzsche; a dog gives such unquestioning, unconditional love and with sufficient training they are naturally gifted when it comes to taking orders, orders which must be obeyed.

-“It sounds like you have suffered, Arthur,” I empathised.

-“The only suffering is caused by desire. We must rid ourselves of desire and only then will we find contentment,” he replied.

Another intellectual bolt from the blue - I wondered what Arthur the Zen Buddhist Nazi could possibly do for fun. While the idea of controlling our desires sounded superficially attractive I didn't want to ditch my cravings completely. Weren't desires the spice of life? Babies and bathwater, hammers and nuts, sprang metaphorically to mind. Desire yes, obsession no way. The latter was so debilitating. I was with Arthur on that one.

-“So the underlying primary justification of life comes down to sexual reproduction but we should rid ourselves of desire in order to live contentedly?” I summarized.

-“Exactly,” replied Arthur.

-“It sounds very gloomy.”

-“That is because life is shit and then you die.”

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-“I can’t accept that depressing conclusion, Arthur.”
Lighten up man, I thought.

-“Maybe you are a typical Englishman, like all those Americans who demand to be happy. They are fools living in a mental Disney Land on Planet fucking Candyfloss.” Arthur swore in English with the natural ability of Barney Bear back in Sussex Gardens.

-“How do you go on with life?” I asked undeterred by Arthur’s remorseless cynicism.

-“I have a will to live and Neitzsche. That is enough.”

-“Your dog?”

-“Yes my dog and Freidrich Neitzsche, the greatest philosopher of them all, but now I have work to do. Perhaps we will have time to speak again?” said Arthur with finality. He turned and walked back to the bar with his trusty hound in his arms.

-“I would like that very much,” I shouted as the dynamic duo exited from the lounge and disappeared from view.

I didn’t see Arthur again until the following morning. Retiring to my room early that night I greedily read the chapter on Neitzsche in *The Great Philosophers* growing increasingly confident that I could now spell his name

correctly. Twelve hours later as a new day was starting I found Arthur in tears sat slumped behind the reception desk.

- "Arthur, what is the matter?"

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I felt slightly uncomfortable by his out of character and self indulgent display of melancholia.

- "It's Neitzsche! He's gone."

- "Dead?"

- "Oh my God! Don't say that."

- "What's happened to Neitzsche, Arthur? - you are not making much sense."

- "Someone left the door open and Neitzsche has escaped," Arthur explained before collapsing again head in hands into a fit of sobs.

- "Then we must find Neitzsche," I suggested calmly. To be honest I didn't give a fuck about the spoilt little bastard.

- "Are you stupid? He could be anywhere."

- "Correct, so the sooner we start the search the better."

Arthur managed to pull himself together and we systematically scoured the immediate neighbourhood of the old town. Passersby and tourists were puzzled by

Arthur who cut a strange figure, frantically searching under cafe tables shouting “Neitzsche!, Neitzsche!”; an action made all the weirder by the simultaneous waving of an enticing frankfurter sausage.

After a couple of hours with no result we decided to split up in order to cover twice the ground, agreeing to meet back at the hotel later

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on that day. Once more I crossed the Main by the iron bridge into the *Sachsenhausen* district and ended up in an adjacent public park. I was on the point of giving up and going for a pint when I noticed frantic canine activity over by the children’s play area. Parents were busy shepherding their kids away from the scene and voicing outrage as two dogs blatantly and frenetically copulated by the magic roundabout. I approached and could see that Neitzsche the poodle was being violently bugged by a large feral Alsatian. I let them get on with it. In fairness Neitzsche looked like he was enjoying himself. An hour later I returned to the hotel with a bedraggled and drenched looking poodle in my arms.

-“Thank God that you found him,” screamed Arthur in ecstasy when he saw me approaching with his furry little *raison d’etre*.

-“Don’t thank me. Seeing your tears of joy is all the thanks that I need.”

Inwardly I was laughing my socks off.

-“Just name something and it will be yours,” stated Arthur.

-“I may need to pick your brains on Neitzsche.”

-“Pardon?”

-“Neitzsche the philosopher!”

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-“Of course, my friend. Anything you say but first I need to clean up Neitzsche and put him to bed. By the look of him the poor little soul has been through quite an ordeal.”

-“Naturally,” I replied as Arthur hurried into the hotel with his faithful friend who was now chewing on the gratefully received frankfurter sausage.

Feeling parched I limped off in search of a cold German lager. I was foot sore and had had enough Neitzsche for one day. After a few beers in *Romer*, the chocolate box quarter with its large wooden doll’s houses, I made it home to bed without mishap. I even managed to unlock the hotel door without requiring Arthur’s assistance though he silently appeared as I reached the foot of the staircase in the foyer.

-“Ah, Oliver, I thought I heard you come in. I wanted to thank you again for finding Neitzsche.”

-“Think nothing of it,” I replied.

-“Well, it means everything to me and I need to show you how much I appreciate what you have done.”

I didn’t know what to say.

-“Tomorrow I have a day off from work and with your permission I would like to show you round my beautiful city. Will you let me do that Oliver?”

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-“Of course, Arthur. I look forward to it.”

-“Excellent. I will see you tomorrow after breakfast then?”

-“Yes, after breakfast.”

And so the next morning we set off from the hotel with Neitzsche, held back by his new lead, setting the pace. It seemed that the previous day’s events had not dampened the frisky poodle’s spirit. If anything Neitzsche appeared more animated than usual quickly negotiating the narrow streets, sniffing everything as he went.

-“I want to show you a special place,” said Arthur.

It wasn't far to the special place, which turned out to be an old world black and white three story wooden building.

-“This is the house of Goethe, *Goethe Haus*,” announced Arthur.

I knew that Goethe had written *Faust*, the story of a man who sells his soul to the devil in return for power over the physical world, but that was the extent of my knowledge so I felt a tad underwhelmed.

-“Goethe is arguably the greatest ever German writer and as good as your Dickens and Shakespeare I would say,” pontificated Arthur.

-“I have heard of him but have never read any of his work,” I replied feeling an uneducated oaf.

-“I am sure he is available in English translation though of course that would not be as good as in the original German.”

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-“That goes without saying. When I get back to England I will buy one of his books.”

Arthur nodded in appreciation at my intentions as Nietzsche barked. It really was quite uncanny how the poodle knew when to chip in with vocal affirmation of his master's sentiments.

-“He is perhaps best known for *Faust* but I would suggest that you start with *Young Werther*,” said Arthur.

-“*Young Werther*?” I asked pronouncing *Werther* with a V so it sounded like *Verther*.

-“Yes, you pronounce the title well. The story is about a young man’s infatuation with a woman.”

I thought of Mrs Glynn back in Manchester.

-“The young man, Werther, is a victim of unrequited love,” continued Arthur who spoke better English than I did.

I thought of Mrs Glynn back in Manchester again.

-“How does the tale end?” I asked.

-“Werther commits suicide,” replied Arthur.

Typical of him to suggest such a book, I thought, the Germans not being noted for their sense of humour unless it is at someone else’s expense. Yes, I know that’s a cliché.

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-“In Germany at the time of the publication many young men read the book and then committed suicide,” said Arthur.

-“I can’t wait to read it,” I lied.

-“Anyway, I think that you will enjoy *Young Werther* especially if you have ever had the misfortune to be obsessed with a woman,” smiled Arthur with a cruel gleam in his eye.

-“Was Goethe unlucky in love in his own life?” I asked eager to keep Arthur from delving into my own past.

-“Of course. In many ways Werther is Goethe - Goethe coped with his own frustrations by writing.”

It didn’t work for me, was my first thought.

-“Do you fancy a glass of apple wine? It is a speciality of Frankfurt,” suggested my guide. “My city is known ironically as *Mainhattan* but also as the *Big Apfel!*”

I didn’t need a second invitation and we quickly found a traditional pub near to *St Bartholomew’s* Cathedral that sold the apple beverage. Hotdogs or frankfurters were also ordered and very good they were too. Arthur broke off a piece for Nietzsche and fed him under the table as a blind busker sang a mournful song in German nearby.

-“What is he singing about?” I asked.

-“He is singing about a love that cannot be.”

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-“Like *Young Werther*?”

-“Exactly.”

There followed an awkward silence lasting a good couple of minutes.

-“You wanted to learn more of Neitzsche the philosopher?” resumed an upbeat Arthur.

-“Yes, you said that he was the greatest philosopher.”

-“He is but his is a philosophy for great men with courage, for *ubermensch*.”

-“You lack the necessary courage?”

-“Yes, I have a will to live but not a will to dominate. I know my limitations and therefore I am a pessimist unlike Neitzsche who is an optimist.”

-“Hitler was a fan of Neitzsche?” I suggested mischievously.

-“Yes in a misguided way, but Neitzsche was no anti-semite and he despised nationalism as well as Germany’s cultural tradition. In fact he thought that German culture was a contradiction in terms! His sister who came to prominence after his death and championed her brother’s work was the Nazi.”

-“So you are saying that Neitzsche is primarily about the need for greater individualism and personality development and the negative

racist associations of his philosophy have been misattributed to him?"

-“Yes, he could be an equal source of inspiration for the left as well as the political right. His real target is religion and Christian morality which he likens to a slave morality. Morality is good for the masses but not for special people,” expounded Arthur.

Thus spoke *Zarathustra* aka Arthur. I wasn’t sure if I had what it took to be an *ubermensch* either. Neitzsche had set the bar high – it was a philosophy for high achievers, for those living above the common herd with white hot blood in their veins. Even Arthur with his Prussian aristocratic breeding didn’t think he was up to snuff. Self actualisation and realizing innate potential seemed a laudable enough goal but there were limits to our abilities unless one was a deluded psychopath or on drugs.

-“If you take away nothing else from this conversation then remember that you must follow your instincts,” advised Arthur.

-“Like an animal?”

-“We are all animals, Oliver,” said Arthur.

I pictured Neitzsche the canine being mounted by the huge German Shepherd.

-“I partially agree with your mistrust of rationality but I still think it is the most useful available tool in the box that we had for tackling the mysteries of life,” I replied.

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-“The rational mind is like a leaf borne along in a stream of pre-reflective emotion; the stream being the will to live. Only through the the will can we participate in the underlying reality beyond mere phenomenon - the *noumenon* which equates to the will.”

-“Maybe you are right, Arthur. I don’t know.”

If I was to win Mrs Glynn then I might well need the sheer force of my personality, to shelve reason and logic, and in so doing unleash the dark Dionysian forces of disorder, intoxication and emotion in imitation of a rampant satyr, half man half beast. But those thoughts had made me leave Manchester in the first place. I felt like I was going round in circles and was no nearer to resolving the Mrs Glynn question.

-“I hope you understand that I am on a journey of self-discovery, Arthur.”

-“I thought as much. So what have you learned, Oliver?”

-“Well, I disagree with you on one fundamental point. I do believe that the unexamined life is not worth living.”

-“Like Socrates the slave to reason,” snorted Arthur.

-“Yes, I think he was on to something. In a way Nietzsche and Socrates were both radical thinkers challenging orthodox thinking.”

-“True, but the Greeks set too much store by reason and thwarted progress in philosophy for over two thousand years.”

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-“In your opinion, Arthur, but don’t we need reason to challenge religion?”

-“Again I agree with you on that point. Even Kant the so called master of reason was an apologist for the Christian Church!”

I thought of Ignatius Salvatori in Rome and how he had failed to convince me of God’s existence.

-“Nietzsche rejected the idea of God. Indeed that was his basis for rejecting so-called religious morality. If there is no God then why should we follow the moral precepts of priests? Man must follow his own conscience,” outlined Arthur now warming to his task.

-“I like aspects of Nietzsche’s thought particularly those associated with the quest for personal freedom,” I chipped in.

Arthur nodded his assent and Nietzsche barked.

-“It may not look like much, the life of a hotel porter, but at least I am living life on my own terms as far as that is possible with not much money. My life is existentially authentic.”

- “You are an existentialist?”

-“In Neitzsche’s sense of the word, yes,” replied Arthur. “Existentialism, and I am thinking of the French school of Sartre and Camus who came in the wake of Heidegger, was inspired by Neitzsche.”

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-“You mention France. That is to be the next stage in my odyssey,” I replied.

-“You go with my best wishes and eternal gratitude for finding Neitzsche, in both senses!” smiled Arthur.

-“Thanks to both of them,” I toasted.

We drank some more apple wine and after a couple of hours went our separate ways. The next day I checked out of the hotel and bade farewell to Frankfurt. That morning there was a young girl on reception who settled my eye watering bar tab which I didn’t question as the empirical evidence was irrefutable. At Frankfurt-Main railway station I boarded a direct *TGV* to *Paris Gard de L’Est*. The journey of 300 miles took about four

hours. I never saw or heard from Arthur and Neitzsche again.

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Gay Paris:

In search of further enlightenment (and pleasure) the French capital was the obvious next leg on my journey of self-discovery. I had visited Paris several times and had always loved the vibrant atmosphere; the general feeling of joi-de-vivre on the streets and in the cafes. It was on my way home and time was not pressing - technically I was homeless as Mr Procci was living in my apartment back in Manchester - but there was also another reason. An old school friend, Hughie O'Boyle, had lived In Paris for years and I was keen to look up my old chum from those Cheltenham College days. He

had repeatedly pestered me to visit and here was the perfect opportunity to finally take him up on his offer. As the train pulled into *Gard de L'Est* I resolved to look him up after first finding a hotel and soaking up some Parisian atmosphere with a bit of gentle sight-seeing, good food and fine wine.

Gard de Nord is the next stop up from *Gard de L'Est* on the metro line that heads north to *Charles de Gaulle* airport. I got off there as I know the area, indeed for most English people *Gard de Nord* is their first experience of Paris. I remembered a visit to this station as a fourteen year old on a school trip and how I was enchanted by the slightly different sights, sounds and smells; the way people dress more stylishly in the warmer air, the novelty of the sexy language and the fusion of unfamiliar aromas, of fresh baguettes, garlic and sweetly pungent urine.

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Leaving the main concourse and hitting the busy streets I noticed the backpackers camped by the entrance on sheets of cardboard, waiting for overnight trains to take them to other must-see places. Predatory North African youths hovered nearby and waited for an opportunity to snatch an unattended bag; furtive and wary, all the while watching out for their undercover police opponents. There was a cafe directly across the

main road and I was thirsty for a glass of house red and the opportunity to sit down and observe my fellow travellers entering and leaving the station. As I entered the bar someone the worse for wear was being ejected from the premises by two burly looking waiters.

-*"Pardon, Monsieur,"* apologised the taller of the two waiters as I sat down at a table by the front window and he indicated the derelict drunk now lying untidily in a heap on the pavement. Judging by the embarrassing wet stain on the rear of his pants the man had recently emptied his bowels adding to his abject humiliation. In my rudimentary French I ordered a *demi-carafe* of the house red as the drunken man got to his feet unaided and staggered away. A half an hour later I was back on the streets of my own volition having settled the bill promptly (adding a judiciously large tip). I bought a street paper for a couple of euros off a homeless type who was yelling "*L'Issue Grand!*" and continued down a side street that I knew from past experience offered several medium priced hotels.

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The fat unshaven Frenchman on reception was straight from central casting managing to simultaneously convey an air of Gallic indifference with downright

truculence. I was pretty sure that he could speak English but chose not to as I struggled to book a double room with a shower for a couple of nights.

-“Bon nuit monsieur. Je voudrais une chambre avec douche pour deux nuits,” I had asked using my best Charles Aznavour accent.

When I pulled a big roll of cash out Gaston (that was his name) greedily perked up. He scribbled down my passport details on a smudged photocopied form as I counted out the required amount fantasising that I was an international assassin on a job. In reality the French authorities would have been able to track me down swiftly; the surprisingly diligent and frankly pedantic Gaston had even documented my mother’s maiden name. Formalities completed I was handed an unremarkable room key and pointed in the direction of the staircase. I think Gaston had outlined the breakfast itinerary, just picking up the words *cafe-croissants-matin* in an unintelligible stream of gruffly barked instructions.

-“A quelle heure est le petit dejeuner?” I asked tentatively.

-“A huit heures!” was Gaston’s terse reply. He must have told me the time already.

I slept on top of the bed covers that night using my coat for warmth not wanting to risk touching the sheets with my bare skin while

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thinking of Sussex Gardens. It was a bit early for breakfast when I woke after an uncomfortable night so I left the hotel in search of a *tabac*. Luckily there was one nearby and I bought a carnet or book of metro tickets which would allow me to travel around the city cheaply. I resisted the urge to return to the hotel for Gaston's breakfast and found a cafe by the *Gard de Nord* ordering a coffee with milk and a croissant before heading for *Le Metro*.

The station at *Chatelet Les Halles* was a good starting point for pedestrian exploration being near to the centrally located *Rue de Rivoli*. Once out on street level I headed for the *Pont Neuf*, scene of an implausible cinematic love story between a blind artist and an ugly vagrant, and looked down at the dark waters of the Seine which winds its way through the city in a single large sweeping curve. An entrepreneurial newspaper vendor sat by the river bank sold me an English newspaper for five euros and I headed for the Tuileries Gardens with its comfortable park benches painted in verdant green. It was a pleasant morning I felt like killing an hour with the cryptic crossword; sometimes I

make better decisions after I have been absorbed in a distracting mental task.

Should I go and see Hughie O'Boyle that day? His address was scribbled in my diary and I knew it would probably take the rest of the morning to track him down. Hughie lived in *Tolbiac* in the 13th arrondissement which lies to the south east of the city near to the *Place D'Italie*. It is known as the Asian Quarter which the Vietnamese,

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the former colonial Indo-Chinese, have made their home. I folded my paper in half and looked at the crossword clues as a fearless pigeon pecked at the ground near to my right shoe and a beautiful young French girl sped by on roller blades. Seeing Hughie O'Boyle again was going to be fun...

As the tube train emerged from the light and traversed the river to the accompanying sound track of a busking Rumanian accordionist, I thought about Paris and its history. Using the bullet point technique I employed in my aborted Manchester novel here are some key facts about Paris for your perusal:

- The name Paris derives from the Celtic Parisii tribe who inhabited the area in the 3rd century BC.

- 52BC invaded by the Romans and named Parisius.
- Christianity introduced 3rd century AD by St Denis who was subsequently beheaded by the Romans on Martyr's Hill or Montmartre.
- Invaded by Franks and later Vikings.
- By 12th century Paris is capital of France.
- 1420 Paris captured by Henry V of England and stayed English until 1436.
- 24th August 1572 St Bartholomew's Day Massacre saw thousands of Protestants butchered by Catholic majority.
- 1789 French Revolution.
- 1799 Napoleon seizes power.

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- 1848 Louis-Phillipe overthrown and Napoleon III becomes dictator of France.
- 1870-71 Franco-Prussian War.
- Late 1800's Baron Haussmann designed wide boulevards and avenues characteristic of modern Paris.
- 1888 Eiffel Tower built.
- 1940 Hitler's army invades France during World War II.
- 1968 student riots.

My search for Hughie O'Boyle that morning proved to be less straightforward than my bullet point history of Paris. At first it had been enjoyable trawling the streets of *Tolbiac*; the neighbourhood a hive of activity with its plethora of Asian restaurants and furniture dealers hawking the semi-antique armoires and wardrobes that clutter the sidewalks. For a full ten minutes I had even stopped to watch a dirty down-and-out make fastidious preparations for his lunch on a vacant door step. The hobo gourmand was oblivious to my presence as he neatly arranged the bread and pate on napkins before producing a steaming fully cooked chicken from a foiled container and a bottle of good quality claret from an inside pocket of his coat. It was a meal fit for a king and summed up the Parisian mentality of insisting on certain basic essentials: "I may be homeless but I will eat well!"

When I arrived at the tenement block housing Hughie's apartment he wasn't in which was no great surprise. The obese old lady concierge

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shrugged her shoulders and grimaced when I had asked politely if she might know my friend's current whereabouts. I was on the point of giving up my search, having scoured virtually all the bars in the area, and headed towards the metro station which was abutted by a scruffy looking cafe. By the sound of it a heated

row was going on inside and for some inexplicable reason the commotion drew me in. I might have known O'Boyle would be involved and predictably the belligerent Irishman was stood at the counter as I entered the seedy establishment.

Typically my friend who could start a row in an empty room was arguing with two of the locals in fluent French gesticulating wildly with his arms resembling a deranged maestro. Hughie O'Boyle hadn't changed in the intervening years since our last encounter and I would have recognized his battered pugilistic features and unruly red hair anywhere. The other two coves looked odd in a way that would have provoked antipathy in a less bohemian English tavern. The taller of the two with long dark greasy hair parted in the middle and a thin wispy moustache resembled a drug addict version of Charles II or a knackered *Dartagnan*, while the short dumpy specimen could have been auditioning for *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame* so extreme was his ugliness and twisted quasi-modic deportment.

- "*Descartes etait un apologiste chretien!*" ("Descartes was an apologist for the Christian faith!"), screamed O'Boyle at the dissolute cavalier.

-“*Chretien? Vous etes un cretin! Un fou!*” (“Christian? You are a cretin! A mad man!”), replied Hughie’s verbal adversary.

The insults were being traded with speed, accuracy, and comical amplitude. Some but not all of the conversation I understood but O’Boyle was to subsequently confirm the gist. I will therefore take the liberty of giving you the rest of this philosophical debate between Ireland and France in English, with O’Boyle on serve to *Dartagnan*.

O’Boyle: “Descartes, who looks like you by the way, was a rationalist fanatic who didn’t have the courage of his convictions!”

Dartagnan: “He believed in reason but had to pretend that he believed in God. The times he lived in were dangerous for heretics, and thank you for the compliment.”

O’Boyle: “It wasn’t a compliment and I don’t accept that excuse. For most of his life he lived in Holland and could have stated his true beliefs with impunity!”

Dartagnan: “Englishman, you are a fool and a pig!”

O’Boyle: “I am fecking Irish you swine!”

It had looked like they were going to come to blows but despite the aggressive posturing the dialogue continued unabated.

Dartagnan: "He was the father of modern philosophy and a genius."

O'Boyle: "His method of doubt was good as far as it went but he used it selectively. We should mistrust our senses I agree but we should

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also doubt our so-called subjective rationality and don't get me started on the ambiguity of language which calls into question the truth of any statement or assertion."

Meanwhile Quasimodo was keeping his counsel; occasionally smirking in acknowledgement or disagreement. For the most part he seemed to be on the side of his compatriot but it was difficult to tell. Ignored by the central protagonists I for my part had managed to attract the barman's attention and was sat down at a table with a glass of wine enjoying the entertainment on offer.

O'Boyle: "*Cogito ergo sum, or je pense donc je suis, my arse!*"

The unsavoury musketeer's face reddened, and the bar went eerily quiet, but he quickly regained his composure.

Dartagnan: "We will never agree about Rene Descartes and his place in the history of philosophy. For me he is

the master but for you he is an idiot and worse than that a hypocrite,”

O’Boyle: “He should have stayed in that bloody oven, but maybe he was right about one thing?”

Dartagnan: “What is that, Irishman?”

O’Boyle: “The connection between the body and the soul has a physical location..... but it is not the pineal gland!”

Dartagnan: “Where is it then O’Boyle?”

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O’Boyle: “Why it’s the liver and mine is in need of exercise now! It is the gateway to the soul.” More wine, patron, for my friends.”

While the bartender did the honours Hughie turned to face me and acknowledged my presence for the first time without seeming at all shocked to see me.

-“Oliver! How long have you been sat there?” he asked calmly as if he had seen me a couple of hours instead of ten years earlier.

-“Not long, I was enjoying the debate,” I replied.

O’Boyle then introduced me to his two friends starting with the tall long haired Frenchman.

-“This is Serge. Serge, this is Oliver who is an old school friend.”

We shook hands cordially.

-“And this is Clooney,” said Hughie as the dumpy troll stepped forward and offered his hand in welcome.

-“Clooney?” I repeated in case I hadn’t heard correctly.

-“Yes, after George Clooney,” laughed O’Boyle.

Clooney self deprecatingly guffawed at the joke so I didn’t feel that guilty or uncomfortable on his behalf and joined in the laughter.

-“It’s a good job you didn’t turn up earlier. Clooney is an existentialist and big fan of Sartre; existence precedes essence, we define

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ourselves by our actions, and all that bumph,” elaborated O’Boyle dismissively.

I thought of Arthur and Neitzsche back in Frankfurt and the hotel worker’s search for an authentic existence and self-actualisation. Was Clooney happy? I somehow doubted it despite his veneer of drunken bonhomie. Poor bastard, I thought.

-“Where do you stand on Descartes and Sartre, Oliver?” asked O’Boyle.

I don't think O'Boyle expected me to have a ready answer but I did, courtesy of *The Great Philosophers*.

-“Clearly Descartes was a key figure in Philosophy,” I replied confidently. “But maybe he did set too much store by rationality and science. They cannot be relied on to completely explain the universe, the meaning of life and everything! At least I don't think they can.”

I thought of Kant and his *noumenal* realm that lies beyond the ken of human perception, where perhaps great art and music exist in timeless non-spatial eternity, of Arthur's advocacy of instinct, and Ignatius Salvatori's unshakeable faith.

-“That was what I was trying to explain to my French friends here,” beamed O'Boyle triumphantly at Clooney and Serge, the American cop sounding duo, which prompted me to continue with a specific example in support of my argument and my friend. And what an

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example! I almost sounded like I knew what I was talking about. Listen to this...

-“Sub-atomic particles specifically electrons do not behave in a predictable way and can appear as waves or particles at the same time, dependent on who is observing; the observer affecting the observed reality,”

I pontificated like one of those annoying little know-alls on University Challenge.

-“Bravo! There you have it you French fools. Science does not explain everything. Sometimes the world is inexplicable,” exclaimed O’Boyle in French clearly delighted by my contribution to the debate.

His adversaries both looked impressed and nodded in reluctant acceptance which prompted O’Boyle to slap Clooney on his hump as if to underline the superiority of my argument, which I thought unnecessary. But O’Boyle wasn’t finished...

-“And having demolished Rene Descartes what do you think about Jean-Paul Sartre, Oliver? He’s Clooney’s hero.”

O’Boyle pointed accusingly at Clooney. Again my response was rehearsed and I reeled it off.

-“Sartre’s philosophy advocates personal freedom; an individual defining his or her essence. I agree that we have the power to be the people we truly want to be and live an authentic existence, in theory.”

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-“You say in theory?” probed O’Boyle more for the benefit of Clooney I suspected than for his own understanding.

-“In theory, yes. I think there are limits to how free we can be given the need for most people to earn a living and the family duties and responsibilities that most people have,” I answered suddenly realising how much Clooney’s hunchback must have cramped his existentialist style and wondering why he wasn’t a Marxist, dare I say it.... with a chip on his shoulder.

-“You say most people?” asked O’Boyle.

-“Well I don’t include myself when I refer to most people. As you know, my father left me a lot of money which allows me to largely live life on my own terms.”

-“So you think Sartre’s existentialism is like the American Dream. We can only be the people we want to be if we have plenty of money to start with!” shouted O’Boyle for the benefit of the whole bar first in English and then in French translation prompting grunts of agreement from a couple of elderly customers sat nursing their sad looking small beers.

-“That’s a cynical interpretation but yes, that’s what I believe. Currently I am on a journey of self discovery which would have been impossible without the free time to do it and the money to pay for my travelling expenses,” I admitted.

-“You could always try working for a living, Oliver,” ribbed O’Boyle.

-“Now why would I go and do something silly like that!”
I smiled.

Hughie O’Boyle nodded in agreement. Like me the Irish *bon-viveur* had been left a large inheritance and had never worked a day in his entire pampered life.

Have you heard the one about the Englishman, the Irishman and the two Frenchmen? They all got totally pissed in a *Tolbiac* bar and then went their separate ways with the Englishman and the Irishman going back to the latter’s apartment and the other two having a sumptuous meal on a vacant doorstep or in a vacant warm oven. I don’t know if the last bit is true but I did end up back at Hughie O’Boyle’s place. He had lured me back there to meet his girlfriend and the love of his life, Nazia or Naz for short. When I first set eyes on this ravishing olive skinned beauty I could see the reason for Hughie’s O’Boyle’s total devotion. Naz was reclining on a large beaten up sofa reading a book when we staggered existentially into the room like the authentic drunken fools we were. Her hair was dyed peroxide blonde and she wore punk style clothing; T-shirt, drainpipe jeans and heavy combat boots which paradoxically emphasised her femininity.

O’Boyle: “Naz, this is Oliver. Oliver this is Naz, my beloved one.”

I slurred a greeting. She nodded and smiled.

O'Boyle: "Naz is from *The Magreb*, second generation."

I assumed he meant Algeria but didn't seek clarification not wanting to interrupt O'Boyle in full flow.

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O'Boyle: "How long ago did we meet, darling?"

Naz: "Nearly three years ago, Hughie. Our anniversary is coming up."

O'Boyle: "Don't worry darling I haven't forgot. I thought about booking a table for two at our favourite restaurant on the Rue Mouffetard."

Naz: "That would be perfect, darling."

I thought that I detected an undercurrent of sarcasm in Naz's reply but O'Boyle, if he noticed, let it go.

O'Boyle: "I've brought an old school friend home, darling. Oliver and I go back to my Cheltenham College days."

Naz: "I know Cheltenham."

O'Boyle: "You never told me that. I mean I know that you have lived in England but I thought that was just London."

Naz: "There's a lot that you don't know about me, Hughie. A racehorse owner took me to racing there as his guest, so I know Cheltenham."

O'Boyle: "What happened? Didn't you get the trip?"

Naz: "I got the distance but the going was too heavy."

O'Boyle laughed at Naz' witticism and I did too, impressed by her command of the English language.

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O'Boyle: "Cheltenham is noted for its energy sapping ground. Isn't that right, Oliver?"

- "It sucked the life right out of me," I agreed.

O'Boyle: "Drinks for everyone, I think!"

Hughie busied himself with glasses and ice clattering about noisily in the adjoining kitchen in this compact one bedroom apartment. There were books and artefacts everywhere which made it look comfortably lived in and interesting in a donnish way though it could have done with a good spring clean.

Naz: "So where did you run into Hughie today?"

- "In a bar near the Tolbiac metro station."

Naz: "Was it a scruffy looking place?"

I nodded.

Naz: "Yes, I know it. Was he talking to a hunchback and a tall man with long hair?"

- "Clooney and Serge!"

Naz: "Ah, I see that you have met the philosophers."

- "Yes, the Existentialist and the Cartesian," I confirmed.

Naz: "They came here one night but now I won't allow it."

- "What happened?" I asked.

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Naz: " Hughie started fighting with Serge using pool cues as pretend swords and they wrecked the place."

- "Really?" I feigned surprise.

Naz: "Yes and to make matters worse Clooney climbed out of the window and up on to the roof. A crowd gathered down below and started shouting up at him to jump!"

- "What happened?" I asked.

O'Boyle: "He chose to live which is the ultimate existentialist act, and I managed to haul him down from the roof," interjected my friend who had walked back into the room with a tray bearing three large martinis, shaken and stirred with an olive apiece. "Now I only get to see Clooney and Serge on neutral ground."

Hughie graciously handed Naz her drink and then one to me in turn.

O'Boyle: "You'll like this concoction though it does come with a government health warning."

-“What’s in it?” I asked with some trepidation; O’Boyle having a legendary reputation when it came to alcohol tolerance.

O'Boyle: "Three parts gin, vodka, vermouth and a hint of apple schnapps. Let’s put it this way, I don’t think that you will be going anywhere tonight."

-“But I have a hotel room near *Gard de Nord*,” I explained at the same time knowing that resistance was futile.

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O'Boyle: "You can collect your possessions in the morning and spend the rest of your time in Paris here. I was impressed by your knowledge of philosophy earlier. I think we could have some interesting conversations with Clooney and Serge."

Naz: "Hughie is right. You can sleep on the sofa while you are in Paris if that is acceptable?"

-“Yes, that would be fine. Thank you both very much for the hospitality,” I responded.

Naz: "The sofa is very comfortable. Ask Hughie."

O'Boyle: "Ha ha. Naz makes me sleep on it when I get too drunk."

Naz: "Which is most nights!"

O'Boyle: "Guilty as charged."

I didn't think that I would get drunk every night if Naz was my woman, not if it meant sleeping on the sofa, though it started to look increasingly inviting after the third and then the fourth cocktail. Eventually Hughie made his excuses and said it had been a long day and that he was going to bed. "Naz will keep you entertained!" he exclaimed as he closed the bedroom door behind him. For a few moments there was an awkward silence before Naz spoke.

Naz: "So what really brings you to Paris, Oliver?"

- "Apart from tracking down my old friend, Hughie, you mean?"

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Naz: "I don't think that is the real reason for your visit."

- "You are very perceptive, Nazia. I suppose that I have embarked on a grand tour of the major European cities, if that doesn't sound too grand."

Naz: "Why?"

Sometimes the simple questions can be the most disarming and I fumbled for a reply.

- "Er...it started as a search for the truth. I felt that my life back in England was spiralling out of control and

that I needed time out to regain some kind of perspective.”

Naz: “Is there a woman involved?”

-“Yes, there is. How did you know?”

Naz: “Because there usually is. Tell me about her.”

-“Well, there’s not much to tell. My love for her is unrequited. I don’t really know her that well.”

Naz: “So maybe you are just in love with a fantasy, with the idea of being in love like a Shakespearean dupe?”

-“Maybe. All I know is that my passion for this woman, who is quite a bit older than me, was all consuming and that I was afraid of doing something stupid.”

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Naz: “You should return to this woman and confront her with how you feel. Until then you will never be happy.”

-“I am making my way home now in a roundabout way.”

Naz: “Don’t leave it too long. A woman can’t wait forever.”

I nodded in acknowledgement of Naz’s feminine wisdom and sipped on my martini.

Naz: "Tell me about your journey though I think I know about it already."

- "How could that be possible? I haven't even spoken with Hughie about my recent travels and even if I had he hasn't had the time to tell you," I replied.

Naz: "I have dreamt of your journey and I foresaw that you would come to this place."

I was intrigued by this claim though I didn't believe it.

- "Then tell me where my journey began," I asked playing along with the charade.

Naz: "Your odyssey started in London where you met a man named Socrates."

I was stunned by this revelation but tried to keep a straight face. I wanted to know how she knew, but also how much she knew so I gestured for her to continue.

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Naz: "Socrates told you to go to Athens in search of the truth. There you found many answers, but also dangers."

- "Dangers?"

Naz: "Yes, dangers. Were you not nearly killed in a car accident by the Cyclops and then bewitched by the beautiful Calypso who would have kept you in a

disreputable Greek hotel forever had Dimitri not come to your aid?"

I nodded meekly. How did she know all this shit?

Naz: "But you have protectors as well. The fat priest saved you on the flight to Rome after you had seen a black feathered harbinger of death, did he not? And I am also your guardian."

I began to wonder what O'Boyle really had put in the drinks considering the possibility of some hallucinogenic absinthe ingredient. That would be just like O'Boyle, probably laughing his cock off in the bedroom next door as I tripped and groped my way through this chemically manufactured nightmare, but there was more...

Naz: "You were stopped at the German border by a *grippenfuhrer* on a trumped up charge and this threatened to bring your quest to an inglorious end, but by staying cool you survived the ordeal. Then you met Arthur, the crypto-fascist hotel receptionist who told you to follow your instincts and stop over-analysing everything like a rationalist fanatic, to become an *ubermensch* driven by the will to

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live and the will to dominate; his dog Neitzsche bringing you closer together. When it comes to the woman you

say that you love then maybe you should follow Arthur's advice. This will be for you to decide."

-“So what shall I do in the meantime?” I asked trying not to sound too pathetic.

Naz; “You have to continue on your journey home using only trains, no planes or cars, and claim your woman. But first you must sleep with me. It has been foretold in the dream.”

Nazia rose from her set and pulled her T-shirt over her head revealing a magnificent pair of breasts squeezed together in a flattering lacy brassiere that accentuated the depth of her cleavage.

Naz: “Take me Oliver, take me!” she commanded.

-“What about Hughie next door?”

Naz: “Forget Hughie.”

-“I can't. He's my friend.”

Naz: “Seize the moment. Life is for living. Remember that your mother died of a broken heart.”

-“But I never really knew my mother...”

That was the last thing I remember. Despite my desperate efforts to stay awake I lost consciousness and fell into deep *REM* sleep. When I

woke up some time the next afternoon in sodden clothing I was back in my hotel room near the *Gard de Nord*.

Amsterdam and the Lotus Eaters:

An hour after waking I was sat in the first class compartment of an express train bound for Amsterdam. It hadn't been a straightforward decision. *The Eurostar* terminal and the offer of a speedy passage to Waterloo had nearly seduced me when I had entered the concourse at *Gare de Nord*. I wasn't sure why I was delaying my return to England but the promise of sex and drugs, and my unquenchable thirst for knowledge, was hurtling me towards Holland at breakneck speed. Everything had happened so quickly. Pausing only to leave a few euros on the counter for Gaston – I hadn't meant to piss the bed again – I knew that I had to leave Paris immediately. When I got the chance and my memory hopefully returned I would think about writing a thank you letter to Hughie O'Boyle and Nazia, maybe. As I settled back into my comfortable reclining seat I looked out of the tinted window as the *TGV* silently whooshed its way through the flatlands of Northern France. Using my phone and the onboard internet service I took the opportunity to look up a few facts about Amsterdam, most of which I knew already.

- Amsterdam is built around a dam on the river Amstel.
- Starting as a fishing port it became a massive trading port in the 17th century Dutch Golden Age.

- Amsterdam's prosperity declined in the 1700's and 1800's as Britain took command of the high seas and international trade.
- 1815 United Kingdom of the Netherlands founded.

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- Amsterdam is built on 90 islands connected by 200 bridges.
- 1940 Germany invaded.

Those bloody Germans again with their will to dominate!

As I pictured a goose stepping Arthur and Neitzsche back in Frankfurt my waiter returned with a cold *Amstel* beer. It wasn't my first visit to Amsterdam so I knew what was on the itinerary. I still hadn't seen a single Van Gogh or a Rembrandt, and as for the Anne Frank Museum, forget about it. By definition Amsterdam meant coffee shops and The Red Light district and after finding a hotel that was where my researches would inexorably take. Having a few beers beforehand was all part of the preparation.

Such was my haste to explore the city I booked into the first place that I saw on exiting *Centraal Station*. *Jimmy's Hotel* said the sign. "See you Jimmy!" Even now, long after the event, I sometimes repeat this mantra to myself in a parody of a Glaswegian accent.

Did I really stay at *Jimmy's Hotel*? I mean, did I really stay at *Jimmy's Hotel*? "Too right you did, pal."

-“How long you stay?” had asked the Moroccan desk man and Jimmy’s front of house public face.

-“A few days,” I had replied handing over the rental for three nights which despite the general crappiness of the place wasn’t cheap in fact it was outrageous robbery.

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-“Here is key to room,” said Abdul. “If you come back late then ring bell and I will open front door of hotel.”

Fair enough, I thought, as Abdul lay back down on his camp bed behind the hotel reception desk. It was 6pm by my watch and still early by most peoples’ standards but maybe Abdul was getting some shut-eye in before the night time rush? I didn’t want to be unfairly judgemental.

Okay, it’s confession time. For the astute amongst you my story is probably beginning to sound implausible notwithstanding the unlikely but true claim that I stayed at Jimmy’s Hotel. Frankly I have not been honest with you about the extent of my experience with women, thus far. Transgender Trudie wasn’t the first. If Trudie *had* been the first then I am not sure that I would have

been able to shrug off the experience in the casual manner that I have previously suggested in my narrative...

It was Matron who took my cherry. There, I've said it. It was Matron who sexually harassed me and took my virginity one afternoon in the first-aid room at Cheltenham College and there have been other women since, lots of other women, but none to match Matron until I met Mrs Glynn that first time in The Grange. Like Frankfurt Arthur, and I feel ashamed to tell you this, there have been occasions when I have paid for prostitutes, hence my intimate knowledge of Amsterdam. But during the incremental and at times painful transition from masturbatory teenage lust to a need for a full mature

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adult relationship (based on equality and mutual respect) I have tried to leave those sordid days behind. Sex is not a game and every man has to grow up and put behind him such childish notions. Calypso was an aberration (ditto Trudie) and I refused Nazia's overtures in Paris, I think. Amnesia is no excuse I know but I am as certain as I can be that I did not betray my friend Hughie O'Boyle. If I was to have any chance with Mrs Glynn back in Manchester then I knew that it would only be possible if I started acting like an adult with honesty

and the utmost integrity. I knew that being obscenely rich might help as well.

Please believe me when I tell you that I am a reliable narrator, facing the same difficulties as any first person story teller be it *David Copperfield* (not the magician) or *Pip* with his great expectations. We don't always know the truth ourselves and probably I will be better judged not by my words but by my actions when my story is finally told in full. *All Cretans are liars*, said the Cretan. You will be the judge. For the record, I really did stay at *Jimmy's Hotel*. Why would I lie about that? Why would anyone lie about that? *I stayed at Jimmy's Hotel* is my *cogito ergo sum* and indisputably true. If you believe nothing else that I say then at least accept that claim as fact, even though I still struggle to accept its veracity myself. *I stayed at Jimmy's Hotel ergo I am...*

Resisting the temptation to lie on my uncomfortable hotel bed and moronically stare at the TV (permanently set on the *MTV* channel with scantily clad go-go girls gyrating in slow motion) I didn't even bother with unpacking. A snoring Abdul was audible behind reception

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as I headed out and made a beeline for the Red Light district - it was the only part of town that I knew well. Stick with what you know as the saying goes, especially if you are too tired or mentally jaded to explore afresh.

The early evening air was crisp hinting at the coming winter as I strode down busy streets adjusting to the novel spectacle of hundreds of cyclists dodging identikit middle aged men with ponytails. There were also thousands of football hooligans in town, their presence signalled by loud aggressive bouts of chanting. Chelsea were playing Ajax later that night in a Euro qualifier and already the drunken hooligans were being rounded up on the *Damrak* by seven foot Dutch cops and their vicious Alsatian guard dogs. Half a dozen of England's finest had been lined up against a wall waiting for the police transport to arrive. Amongst them was the unmistakable Barney Bear, the leader and most vocally abusive, with his fat spotty arse hanging out of the back of his tracksuit bottoms.

-“Ya cheeky Dutch cunts,” he was screaming as I hurried past with my collar up eager to avoid eye contact.

The last thing I needed was Barney Bear in tow on my quest for spiritual and intellectual enlightenment. Hastily I scuttled down a passageway towards *Zeedijk* and Chinatown. My fat nemesis was instantly forgotten when I caught sight of the working girls sat in the windows clad in fluorescent bikinis, though it has to be said that this part of Amsterdam boasts some of the city's most charming canals. Resisting the temptation to take a few scenic photographs on my cell phone and the offer of a free space cake from a dangerously pretty

mugger's assistant I headed into a crowded bar and ordered a Heineken. Sitting at the bar which it turned out was owned by a fat homosexual American looking for fun I wondered who the outrageous hippy was sat next to me, visible in the mirror behind the bar. Then I realised with a shock that the bearded stranger was me looking every inch the eccentric intellectual and pub philosopher. My beaver was spectacular.

-“You new in town, buddy?” asked the obese proprietor who had edged on to an adjacent bar stool.

-“I’m just passing through,” I replied, thinking what a perfect match Barney Bear would be for this trans-Atlantic porker.

-“Amsterdam can be a fun time if y’awl know where to look,” said the *iron* with a distinctive Virginian drawl.

-“I’ve been here before so I know where to look.”

-“I take it you’re not the culture-vulture type?” he leered, it has to be said, insightfully.

-“Not really, I am here for some down time before returning to England.”

-“I hear you, buddy.”

By focusing intensely on my Heineken to the exclusion of everything else in the bar I was trying to politely convey the message that I

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wanted to be left the fuck alone, but the Barney look-alike was persistent.

-“You look like you keep in pretty good shape, buddy.”

I ignored this ham fisted chat-up line but he continued.

-“My name is Frank and this is my place.”

There was no escape. I had to shake his proffered hand and talk to the pestering Yank.

-“How long have you been the owner?” I asked, trying to sound interested. Frank the fucking Yank!

-“A couple of years - I bought the place outright for cash after I left the military.”

The military! It must have been the Catering Corps, was my initial reaction to Frank’s back story.

-“You were in the military?” I asked out of a sense of amusement as much as anything else.

-“Yeah, I was a Navy Seal,” claimed 400 pound Frank.

An elephant seal more like.

-“What about you, buddy, you been in the military?” asked Frank.

-“Yes, I was in The Regiment,” I lied. Two can play at that game.

-“The Regiment! You mean the SAS, buddy?” exclaimed Frank.

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-“We don’t like to advertise, Frank, you understand,” I replied sotto voce.

-“It’s the same in The States, buddy. If you ever found out what I did in the Seals I’d have to kill you!” laughed Frank. “What’s your name, buddy?”

-“Oliver,” I replied.

-“You’re a hell of a guy, Oliver!” bellowed Frank as he patted me on the back. “Get this man another beer,” he ordered the effeminate looking barman.

-“There’s no need,” I tried to protest.

-“Nonsense, it’s the least I can do for a fellow Special Forces guy,” said Frank. “You just tell me if you need anything else, buddy,” he winked suggestively.

Frank waddled off and started talking to a group of tourists who had just wandered into the bar and looked lost. For all his flirtatious ways Frank looked every inch the businessman as he attentively suggested items on

the bar menu to the new arrivals like a veritable Gordon Ramsey. I quickly drained my second beer taking advantage of Frank's preoccupation and feeling slightly heady slid back out on to the streets. I wanted to chill out in a coffee shop with a joint away from the football crowd and other attention seeking types. The enticing entreaties of the girls in the windows fell on deaf ears as I approached the cannabis leafed shop sign in the near distance. It

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read *The Lotus Eaters*, and I entered the cave-like establishment with a sense of anticipation.

The kiosk guy sold me two pre-rolled joints for which you paid a slight premium. It was cheaper to roll your own but I wanted to get a hit quickly.

-“This is good shit, man, very mellow, unless you want something stronger?”

-“I think I will stick with mellow for now,” I replied, handing over the money. “And give me one of those lighters.”

The kiosk guy who looked like a Mr Nice old hippy passed me the disposable lighter decorated with a Bob Marley motif from the display case. He pointed to a dark adjoining room.

-“You can smoke through there, man.”

-“Thanks, man,” I replied.

The dark room had a couple of low wattage lamps but apart from that was devoid of furniture. A large nautical rope of sufficient girth to tow a ship lay on the floor up against the walls of the room forming a sturdy hessian perimeter. I saw a couple of young people sprawled on the floor using the rope as a headrest. The air was thick with distinctive marijuana smoke. I flicked Bob Marley into action with my thumb and took my first drag. The effect was almost instant. I felt relaxed and slightly euphoric. Looking across the room I noticed an attractive woman who slowly came into focus. She was smiling

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back at me. It wasn't a come on. She was just being friendly. I took another drag and closed my eyes...

Somebody was shaking my arm trying to wake me up. I opened my eyes and realised that he was a cop.

-“You cannot sleep here. You need to get up,” he said calmly.

I was outside and lying on a bench in a part of town that I didn't recognize. I sat up and tried to take in my surroundings, to try and work out where the hell I was. The tall policeman had a female colleague. She looked at me sympathetically which prompted my conciliatory response.

-“I’m sorry but I don’t know how I got here or where I am.”

-“You are in the North part of Amsterdam,” replied the female cop in grammatically perfect English with a Dutch accent.

I could see that I was near a large river and that there were many boats and ships moored by the bank a hundred or so yards away.

-“I think that I was smoking cannabis and passed out,” I tried to explain.

-“Then go and smoke some more,” suggested the big cop.

-“How do I get to the Red Light district?” I asked taken aback by the policeman’s liberal approach.

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If I could get back to *The Wallen*, The Red Light, then I would be able to find my way from there to Jimmy’s Hotel. I patted the inside pocket of my jacket. My money and passport was still there.

-“You need to get the ferry back across the river to *Centraal Station*,” explained the lady cop pointing the way.

-“Thank you,” I replied.

-“No problem,” said the cops in unison as they walked away and I headed off in the opposite direction towards the ferry terminal.

The short ferry ride was enjoyable and invigorating as I felt the full force of the wintery sea breeze on my face. I could have done with another twenty minutes on board and the sobering effect of the salty ozone but we soon docked at the rear of *Centraal Station*. Making my way through the busy concourse I resisted the temptation to immediately return to the Red Light district. First I hurried to Jimmy’s Hotel and paid a sleepy looking Abdul another week’s rental. Then pausing only to brush my teeth and take a cursory strip wash at the sink in my room I headed out again, not drawn by the sirens in the shop windows but to return to the coffee shop from the day before which was the last thing that I remembered. Perhaps the Mr Nice hippy guy at *The Lotus Eaters* could fill in the blanks.

-“How’s it going, man?” asked a beaming Mr Nice.

-“Okay, I think,” I replied.

-“You want to buy another joint, man?”

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-“Yes, give me two.”

I handed over the money and felt for the Bob Marley lighter which was still in my pocket.

-“I don’t remember leaving here yesterday,” I said.

-“Yeah man, you looked a bit wasted but you didn’t cause any problems. You just upped and left and said something about Jimmy’s Hotel and waking up Abdul.”

I smiled. What else could I do?

-“So I was okay then?”

-“Cool, man.”

I shrugged my shoulders and thought, fuck it.

Placing the fresh joint in my mouth and working the stiff action of the Bob Marley I leaned back against the heavy rope and allowed the drug to take effect. Why worry about the day before? I hadn’t been robbed and as far as I knew no one was upset. Even the cops had told me to carry on! I started to relax. Through the clouds of déjà-vu smoke I made out a couple of sprawling young hippy types on the other side of the room sat next to the same beautiful woman, with her enigmatic smile. I decided to join her and walked, as nonchalantly as I could, across the room.

-“Hi, how’s it going?” I began.

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-“I’m great,” she replied.

-“I know you are great, but how’s it going?” I asked trying to be humorously engaging.

She smiled like Buddha.

-“Can I sit down here?” I gestured to a space by her side.

-“Sure,” she replied neutrally.

She was about thirty which was slightly older than I had initially assessed from distance but nevertheless very beautiful. Her dark hair was cut short and her features were classically symmetrical. The clothes that she wore were loosely fitted for comfort and practicality but at the same time fashionable and expensive looking. I introduced myself and offered my hand.

-“I am Oliver.”

-“Molly,” she replied shaking my hand softly.

-“You’re American?”

-“Half American, half Dutch,” she replied. “My father was in the military over here. My mother is from Amsterdam,” explained Molly. She offered me her joint which turned out to be made from a stronger type of cannabis. For what seemed like a considerable length of time I was unable or unwilling (it was difficult to discern the difference) to speak. Finally Molly broke the silence.

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-“Good shit, yes?”

I mutely nodded my assent noticing for the first time the distinctive rose shaped signet ring on her right middle finger. It was engraved with the Latin motto, *caute*.

-“What does that mean?” I asked pointing at the inscription.

-“*Caute* means caution,” she replied. “I just liked the design.”

Shortly after she got to her feet elegantly and spoke.

-“I have to go now but if you are here tomorrow then I will see you then,” she said. “You can keep the joint.”

I thanked her and watched this amazing woman leave...

The next few days and weeks are blurred. I must have paid my rent as I kept waking up at Jimmy’s Hotel with the TV on full volume set to the MTV channel. I was always fully clothed on these occasions and my pockets were invariably weighed down with huge amounts of coinage. Sometimes my clothes were soiled, other times I felt reasonably clean. Whether I pissed the bed or not seemed random. I experimented with various combinations of drugs and alcohol in differing quantities and frequencies in an attempt to stay dry, but one night I would be fine with 24 Heinekens and 6 joints and then the next (consuming the exact same amount) uncontrolled copious bed wetting would result.

On the plus side Molly and I became good friends. Every day we would meet up at *The Lotus Eaters* and she would introduce me to some novel exotic strain of weed or dope. I was happy to play the part of willing apprentice, but it wasn't just the mindless consumption of psychotropic substances that was so interesting about my time with Molly. Though heavily under the influence, we started to have some interesting conversations. My new friend was a professional artist of some repute but also had interesting ideas on philosophy and religion which we began to discuss at length.

-“Trust me, Oliver, just trust me,” became her catchphrase.

Molly was intrigued by my odyssey and love for Mrs Glynn, a theme to which she constantly returned lest I forget the central purpose of my journey. For my part and also in the spirit of candour that prevailed I was open with her about my feelings for Mrs Glynn and there was never any suggestion that Nancy and I would be lovers. She was my first female friend and although she was very beautiful I didn't think of her in a sexual way, at least not very often. Though she didn't believe in organized religion her philosophy had a spiritual undercurrent which suited the ethos of *The Lotus*

Eaters. I think it was about a week after we first met that she started to explain her beliefs. As I listened intently during that first impromptu seminar I was only partially distracted by the sight of a nearby spider chasing a fly along the top of the hessian rope.

-“Oliver, I am a pantheist,” declared Molly.

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To be honest I wasn’t sure what a pantheist was.

-“Everything that exists in nature is one reality or substance and there is only one set of rules governing reality,” she explained.

-“Interesting ..., but where does God fit in this grand design?” I asked playing devil’s advocate.

-“God is abstract and impersonal. God and Nature are one and the same thing,” she smiled.

-“So God is present in the joint that I am smoking?”

-“Yes, God is everywhere.”

-“Thanks, God!” I exclaimed as I exhaled a cloud of mind altering smoke.

-“Your thanks are wasted. God is not providential and the soul is not immortal so you won’t be meeting him in the afterlife.”

-“You are saying that God is indifferent?”

-“I am saying that God is nature and that there is only one set of rules governing the whole of reality. Everything that has and will happen is part of a long chain of cause and effect.”

-“So you are a determinist,” I summarised, at the same time trying to get a handle on her philosophy for my own clarification.

-“Exactly. Humans can’t change a thing,” she stated confidently.

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It sounded like as good a recipe as any that I heard for doing fuck all.

-“You say that there is one set of rules that governs the whole of reality. What about the probabilistic behaviour of sub-atomic particles?”

I threw in my Ace.

-“One day perhaps there will be a unifying theory that explains the behaviour of sub-atomic particles. Whatever will be, will be, irrespective of our present wishes; the future has already been decided.”

-“So if humans can’t change anything how should we live our lives?”

-“With tolerance and kindness,” she replied.

-“But if everything is pre-determined why should we behave with kindness? How can we morally be blamed for any of our actions?”

-“We can’t be blamed. Our actions are driven by impulses and we are often unaware of the causes of our desires.”

-“You sound like Freud.”

-“I think he was right about the centrality of the unconscious in shaping our desires.”

All this talk of the unconscious struck a chord. Why was I drawn to Mrs Glynn? Of course she looked like matron. I understood that

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much but was there something else that I had missed? If the reason was buried in the unconscious I might never know why I found that woman so irresistible. But let’s get back to Molly, her dope fuelled master class, and my attempts to decipher her thoughts.

-“When you talk about God and Nature being one in the same you sound spiritual but you ground God in the reality that is present in us and everything around us,” I summarised.

-“I believe that spiritualism and materialism are an essential unity not a duality,” she replied.

-“I know a German who thinks that we can never know the truth through our sense perception. I think that I agree with him.”

Molly smiled and nodded, and handed me another joint rolled with the same high strength cannabis. I had to admit it was top grade shit.

-“I think that common sense and religion are flawed as is science. Science is not much better than common sense. The Germans are on to something when they talk about the noumenal,” I expounded feeling an inspired clever little sod.

Six months later I had a similar epiphany in *The Lotus Eaters* and realised that I had to get back to Manchester and Mrs Glynn. Procci’s lease would be up soon and I would be able to move back into my apartment. Leaving Molly and *The Lotus Eaters* wasn’t going to be easy. I wouldn’t miss Jimmy’s Hotel though Abdul had been tolerant

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of my unpredictable behaviour and late night comings and goings and we were even on first name terms. In spite of my debauched life style in all my time in

Amsterdam I hadn't once been tempted by the sirens. My stay in the city had been a celibate one. It felt like I was growing up. Molly had taught me about tolerance and kindness and respect for other people, particularly women. We are all part of the same oneness. What goes around comes around to bite us in the ass, as Molly had succinctly put it. I was really going to miss Molly but if and only if I could tear myself away from *The Lotus Eaters*.

-“Like you, Oliver, my journey has been a long one,” said Molly.

-“Your journey to pantheism?”

-“Yes, I travelled to India and China and lived there for five years in search of enlightenment.”

-“You make me feel inadequate. My journey has been confined to Western Europe.”

I handed Molly a joint and she took a long drag before continuing.

-“You are a rationalist at heart, Oliver, a philosopher rather than a believer, a disciple of the West rather than the Orient.”

-“I was when I started on my quest but now I am not so sure. I just wanted to understand so that I could be a better man and live a better life; a life in which I am in some kind of control and not a slave to my passions.”

-“Don’t worry Oliver. You are a good man,” said Molly.
“Have you never been religious?”

-“No, never. A holy man in Rome prays for me but I
have always lacked faith.”

-“Faith as you describe it is an interesting idea. I have
studied the various religions, and taken out the bits that
I like, while rejecting the parts that I don’t. Maybe your
all or nothing approach is too demanding?”

-“I must admit that your pantheism and the way you
describe it sounds almost like Hinduism or Buddhism at
times.”

-“I agree, Oliver,” said Molly as she rolled another joint.
“For a while I lived in Tibet and classed myself as a
Buddhist, but now I also subscribe to aspects of
Hinduism as well.”

I was hanging on Molly’s every word by this stage and
totally down with the Eastern mystical vibe like a roly-
poly Buddha sat under a tree but I wasn’t buying
reincarnation as a concept or vegetarianism either.

-“The path to liberation is the renunciation of cravings
and attachments,” explained a serene looking Molly.
Easier said than done, was my initial reaction as I
pictured Mrs Glynn dancing seductively.

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-“We cling to impermanent states and things and this proves ultimately unsatisfactory,” she said. “There is no such thing as a self or an essence in anything.”

That bit sounded like existentialism, embraced by Arthur and the hunchback Clooney both.

-“So how do we escape our suffering?” I asked staying on topic and focused.

-“Only through meditation can we achieve calm and insight.”

-“We have to clear our minds?”

-“That is the ultimate goal, yes. Through zen meditation we can reach the sublime state.”

-“Nirvana?”

-“Yes, Nirvana,” she replied.

I thought of all the brain cells that I had killed off in the last six months and how I must be nearing this desired state of oblivion.

-“Have you experienced Nirvana?” I asked.

-“Several times I have come close but that is my goal.”

-“Does cannabis help the meditative process for you?” I asked already suspecting the answer.

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-“It helps me to relax and forget trivial day to day concerns so the answer to your question is yes,” she replied.

-“So in the meantime how do you live your life? I know you from this place and I regard you as a kind person but what beliefs guide you each day apart from your attempts to attain Nirvana?”

I was eager to find out more about this enigmatic woman and the secret of her serenity.

-“I try to do good each day. I pass on good karma, you get?”

-“Yes I get that. What goes around comes around kind of thing.”

Molly smiled indulgently like a loving parent.

-“I don’t lie, or use rude speech. I am non-violent and abstain from sex.”

It sounded like a monkish existence and not for me but I was nevertheless full of admiration.

-“I only have a few basic possessions and guard against sensual thoughts,” she continued.

In fairness I hadn't been lusting after Mrs Glynn quite so much so maybe Molly's influence had been rubbing off by osmosis.

-“I don't drink and I don't steal.”

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Molly was starting to sound a bit too good to be true. I felt like a few Heinekens and a large cheese burger so made my excuses and arranged to meet her the next day.

-“You must go back to Manchester, Oliver,” she said as I got up to leave *The Lotus Eaters*.

-“Soon,” I replied. “Soon.”

413

Homecoming:

It was a short train journey to the Hook of Holland where I boarded an overnight ferry bound for Harwich. Spring was in the air but the seas were still rough and I spent most of the crossing sat in the bar trying not to focus on the rising and crashing waves spewing their foam on to the ship's deck. I was enjoying a contemplative beer when the undercover Dutch cop made his clumsy approach. He was fat, blonde and a terrible actor though he spoke good English.

-“Do you mind if I join you?” he asked more in the way of a statement than a request, just like a cop.

I nodded and tried to ignore his intrusive presence.

-“Have you been in Amsterdam long?” he asked.

How did he know that I had been living in Amsterdam? I was pissed off so I pretended to be French.

-“Je ne parle pas anglais.”

That threw him. He knew I was English and that I had been living in Amsterdam but couldn't admit that he knew. He knew that I knew that he was an undercover cop checking out if I was involved in any way in the drug trade. When I moved to the bar he didn't bother following me. I could see that he was disappointed; no promotion for Van der Valk. In three hours I would be back in the UK and later that day home in Manchester. My journey was coming to an end. It had

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started with that dream in the Sussex Gardens hotel. Trapped in a cave Socrates had ordered me to head for the light. -"Look away from Mrs Glynn's gyrating form and you will break free of your bonds!"... easier said than done, with so many uniforms trying to slap on the cuffs.

I looked at the barmaid who was attractive in her tight fitting ship's livery but I felt in control. It was a cursory glance rather than the leer it would have been only a few months earlier when my ego had reigned supreme over my id.

Following the auspicious dream I had boarded a plane for Athens in search of knowledge and freedom from my torment, packing the framed picture of Mrs Glynn in my suitcase. I was leaving behind a motley crew; gloomy Oldrich, trans-Trudie and the loutish Barney Bear, but thanks must go to Socrates (the waiter) and

the book he gave me entitled *The Great Philosophers* which proved to be an indispensable travel companion. Socrates will always remind me of my late beloved mentor Flynn and both remain formative influences in my life...

I ordered another beer as Van der Valk exited the bar, presumably looking for another potential drug mule; the hulking cop proving to be no more than a minor irritation. He was in the wrong line of work lacking the necessary finesse but that was his problem.

Athens, home of the philosopher-kings, had nearly killed me. The cyclops taxi driver had turned out to be a bit of a cunt with his crazy

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speeding, yet I continue to wish him well, if he is still alive. *The Continental* of Omonia Square was an equally uncomfortable experience if you remember, but my fond memories of Calypso's cave will stay with me forever, not that that was the last significant event in Athens. If I hadn't met Simon the tramp my odyssey would have developed in a different direction; his lecture on Plato in the shaded foothills of the Acropolis cultivating in me a taste for the mystical and God based credos. I do regret lying to Simon about the invisible cloak but he saw through my deception with the perspicacity of a seasoned kelouri man. Equally astute

was the gourmand priest who saved my life on the flight to Rome by executing the Heimlich Manoeuvre.

If I was ever going to find religion then that in-flight incident should have been the Damascene conversion. I dined with Ignatius Salvatori in the eternal city's best trattoria and together we had considered original sin and the presence of so much evil in the world. At the end of the debate he said he would pray for my soul. Until I embraced the Lord and salvation through Jesus Christ I was bound for Hell and eternal damnation but I still wasn't buying it despite the threats. For all my spiritual shortcomings I had picked up the tab and paid in hard cash before considering the next stage on my journey, the so-called Fatherland on earth, Germany...

The engines slowed and we pulled into Harwich. Thirty minutes later the customs guy was still giving me the third degree.

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-“Can you tell me the purpose of your visit to The Netherlands?” Not again, I had thought.

Okay so I shouldn't have called him a grippenfuhrer but these officious customs guys were beginning to get tiresome. I kept to the same script which with hindsight probably wasn't the smartest tactic.

-“I thought I would hang out in the Dam for a while and find myself.”

A strip search ensued and I was made to touch my toes and cough. The violation of Neitzsche (the poodle) came to mind as I stoically bore my humiliation. Anything that doesn't kill you makes you stronger, right? I had wished I was back with Molly in *The Lotus Eaters* or in bed with Calypso, all nice and cosy in room 51. The customs guy was by this time looking through the address section of my diary.

-“Who is Alkie John?” he asked.

That one took me by surprise.

-“Oh just some guy I used to know in Manchester.”

I left out the bit about him being a defrocked Jesuit priest and resisted the temptation to develop my argument.

-“Mr Procci?” he asked. “He sounds Italian.”

-“He's my tenant.”

-“A lot of drugs come up through Italy.”

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I nodded inscrutably.

-“You have property?”

-“Yes, I am lucky that way.”

-“You are a rich boy, then?”

-“Yes,” I replied. Well, it was true.

-“How did you make your money?”

-“I didn’t. I inherited a fortune.”

I could see that the official didn’t like me. He bundled my belongings back into my case and impatiently gestured for me to proceed to the exit gate. It was simple enough getting a train connection to London King’s Cross and from there a short ride to Euston Station. Treating myself to a first class ticket (It would have been cheaper flying) I settled back for the three hour journey to Manchester. I was nearly home and dry. The train was like the TGV I took from Paris to Amsterdam only a lot slower and I concluded that the waiter service was either non-existent or just plain tardy. In the end I didn’t wait to find out and went in search of refreshment asking a fellow passenger where the buffet car was situated.

I was on the last chapter of *The Great Philosophers* which summarised most of the top thinkers in the 20th century, from Wittgenstein to the cabal of Oxford analysts who assumed that language precedes thought (a big assumption given the existence of

art and music). If I had known I might have been tempted to stop off at Cambridge and check out Ludwig Wittgenstein's old haunts from the vantage point of a punt. He had been that rare breed of mercurial genius who conjure up two ground breaking theories in one life time, both of which turned out to be wrong.

Young Wittgenstein had believed that all genuine knowledge of the world was derived through science but that the greatest questions (the nature of ethics and values, the meaning of life etc) were unanswerable and that philosophy should be confined to the task of clarification within the sphere of the knowable. Are you still with me? The later Wittgenstein in stark contrast had rejected the transcendental realm and focused exclusively on language; all philosophical problems being caused by the ambiguity of language, a theme readily taken up by the Oxford pedants. I think that's enough of Baron von Wittgenstein and his later disciples who perhaps should have gone back to his early work and tried to tune into the transcendental. If my travels and experiences with Arthur and Molly had taught me nothing else then the noumenal was where the real juice was at. Maybe in the future the really clever bods, the physicists and MIT brainiacs will be able to shed some light on this presently unknowable realm, and in the process nail down those troublesome sub-atomic particles. But right then all I could seriously think of was eating a big plate of three dimensional

meat and potato pie, chips, mushy peas and gravy. As soon as I got back to Manchester it was going to be the first thing that I did.

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Quickly skipping down the Piccadilly ramp like a happy child I headed for the *Tea Pot* on Oldham Street, only to be disappointed by the establishment's change of ownership and decline in standards. I had to settle for pie, chips and gravy - they didn't do mushy peas. Slightly pissed off I nevertheless cut into the pie crust with a sense of anticipation, still grateful to be served such a classic northern delicacy. I was half way through my second mouthful of delicious congealed suet when I recognised a familiar voice.

-“Oliver, how the devil are you?”

It was Alkie John sat a couple of booths down. I couldn't speak with a full mouth so Alkie John filled the conversational void and developed his argument.

-“Good God, Oliver, I haven't seen you for ages. Where have you been hiding, old boy?”

I took a swig of tea to cleanse my palate.

-“I've been on a journey, John.”

-“Not down to Cheltenham again, old boy?”

-“No, not Cheltenham. I’ve just got back from the Continent,” I explained.

-“Lourdes, perchance?”

I laughed at the thought.

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-“Not yet,” I smiled.

-“So, ruling out the search for salvation, have you been looking for happiness instead?” twinkled Alkie John.

-“Can I get you something to eat?” I asked, needing time to marshal my thoughts. It was always a game of intellectual tennis with Alkie John.

-“Well, I wouldn’t say no to a sausage sandwich and another mug of tea, if that is alright, old boy?” he replied.

-“No problem,” I agreed.

Alkie John was always good value but he didn’t say much for the next ten minutes as he demolished his food and slurped his tea. Wiping his greasy mouth with a napkin he then stared at me full in the face.

-“So are you happy then, Oliver?”

It was such a straightforward question but one I hadn’t really considered of late, with my lofty musings on the nature of reality and the meaning of life.

-“I think so. I feel a lot more content than I was before I went away,” I replied.

-“Happiness is an activity not a state,” declared Alkie John.

-“Who said that?”

-“Aristotle.”

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-“Are you happy, John?” I asked turning the tables.

-“Stupidity, selfishness and good health are the three prerequisites of happiness and I have none of those qualities,” replied Alkie John.

-“Who said that?”

-“Flaubert, and me just now.”

Alkie John never ceased to amaze me with his erudition.

-“Where are you living, John?”

-“Here and there,” he replied gesturing to the wider world with outstretched arms.

-“That makes two of us. I am temporarily homeless myself until I get my flat back.”

-“You have a squatter?”

-“A legal one, yes, but not for much longer,” I explained.

Alkie John accepted my answer without further comment. I could tell that he wasn't that interested in my domestic arrangements, preferring to discuss weightier intellectual matters.

-“You said that you are more content than you were before you left. What happened in Europe?” he probed.

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-“Well, I met some interesting people and visited various historic cities, but also I have begun to better understand my own mind.”

-“In what way?”

My conversations with Alkie John have always followed the Socratic dialogue format.

-“I have a better insight into my drives and perhaps how better to control them. Drives can be controlled through understanding which is something a woman called Molly taught me in Holland. I no longer feel a slave to my impulses and desires,” I replied.

-“So you know your own mind better then?”

-“I believe that I do.”

-“Believe? Not know?”

-“Can we ever say that we totally know our own minds?”

-“Very true, old boy. Marx showed how much of what we assume to know is imposed by society; Freud how much actually arises from the unconscious,” stated Alkie John.

-“So you are saying that there is no such thing as independent thought at all, due to the intense and relentless pressure from within and without ?”

-“It’s a possibility.”

-“What do you think?” I asked.

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-“I think that we are free within limits. I take responsibility for my own actions. Well, the ones that I can remember,” he smiled wisely.

I took the implicit hint and counted out fifty pounds from my wallet.

-“That’s too much, Oliver, but I appreciate the gesture.”

Alkie John took a twenty pound note but left the remaining sum on the table.

-“After all we are both homeless, Oliver!” he exclaimed.
“As for happiness, the greatest gift of happiness may not be the feeling itself as much as the accompanying

thrill of possibility. Right now I have twenty pounds and a good day's drinking ahead of me ergo I am happy."

I made him take the thirty pounds off the table.

-“You are going to need this. Twenty pounds won't get you far.”

-“It depends where you go, old boy,” he replied.

I pictured John drinking and debating with shameless cavaliers and Mancunian hunchbacks - every city has its marginal dispossessed characters. Alkie John bade me farewell and rose from his seat.

-“All is flux old boy, all is flux!”

-“All is change,” I replied.

-“Exactly, old boy. All is change including the self. I can see that you have changed,” asserted Alkie John.

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-“Have I changed for the better?” I asked as Alkie John was almost out of the door.

-“You are still a good man, Oliver, but now you are a philosopher-king!” announced Alkie John to the entire cafe prompting the owner to interject.

-“I've told you before to shut up. Don't bother coming in here again,” stated the red faced proprietor.

Alkie John bowed theatrically before raising his middle finger to the greasy spoon owner. There were a few titters in the cafe as Alkie John went on his way, down the street to the nearest dive bar, where they serve cheap ale in plastic schooners and the Polish bouncers keep avid watch. Like Alkie John I wouldn't be using *The Tea Pot* again out of solidarity for my friend but primarily because they didn't serve mushy peas.

I booked a room in *The Britannic* on Portland Street for a week and ventured out into the city. As I swerved around the seated beggars congregated in Piccadilly Gardens I caught the strong whiff of marijuana mixed with chlorine fumes from the sculpted fountain; where down at heel children frolic and nearby paedophiles pretend to read newspapers. I scored a twenty five pound wrap of cannabis from a hooded entrepreneurial youth hidden in an alcove abutting the huge concrete pissoir inspired by Marcel Duchamp. I needed some new socks and underwear and entered the *Primarni* store while replaying the sage and still fresh words of Alkie John in my mind.

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-“In the quest saga the hero undergoes a series of tests and trials, negotiates many difficulties, and slays many monsters. Have you vanquished your demons, Oliver?” had asked Alkie John with his usual perspicacity.

I had felt like replying in the affirmative and boldly stating that I was back to claim my prize, my golden fleece, in the form of the widow Mrs Glynn. Instead I had merely shrugged not wanting to tempt fate and scupper my prospects.

Socks and underwear were on the basement level so I descended the elevator still rapt in thought as hundreds of housewives jockeyed for position to get the latest and best bargains in the *Primarni* emporium.

-“Your journey around Europe was I suspect just as much an inward spiritual journey. The prize won after uncertainty and danger is knowledge,” had stated Alkie John with his customary brilliance.

-“Like growing up,” I summarised.

-“Exactly. Becoming an adult requires the same four stages of detachment, difficulty, understanding and transformation,” had explained my alcoholic friend and mentor.

-“In that case I have grown up then because the stages you describe match my own experience exactly,” I had replied.

I had left the country in order to escape my fixation for the widow and nearly lost my life in the process first at the hands of the one-

eyed Greek taxi driver and then by asphyxiation on the short haul flight from Athens to Rome. My intellect continues to be exercised by the thought provoking text *The Great Philosophers* gifted to me by Socrates the waiter but philosophy is primarily an interactive activity. The conversations with Ignatius, Arthur and Molly in particular helped me to develop my own reasonably coherent philosophy, which is a pick n' mix assortment of Kant and Neitzsche with a sprinkling of Eastern mysticism. Nevertheless the quest for knowledge is about striving and I continue to learn each day without ever feeling that the process is futile.

-“Oliver is that you, Oliver Ross?” asked the little dumpy woman who I didn't recognise. Mrs Glynn's char lady could see that I was nonplussed.

-“It's me Peggy. I work for Mrs Glynn at The Grange. I know you from the flat upstairs. I used to see you coming and going,” she explained.

I had a vague recollection of Peggy and her shiny red VW which she used to park under my window at The Grange.

-“Ah, Peggy, how are you?”

-“Very well thank you, Mr Ross. It's nice to see you back. Mrs Glynn mentioned that you had gone on your travels overseas.”

-“How is Mrs Glynn?” I asked as dispassionately as was possible.

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-“She is very well but I think that she will be pleased that you are back,” smiled Peggy.

-“Really?” I asked, my heart suddenly beating faster.

-“Well, between you and me Mr Ross, she has been having a few problems with your tenant.”

-“Mr Procci?” I sought to confirm.

-“Yes him, the Italian gentleman. He has been very noisy in your absence. You were such a quiet tenant and I know Mrs Glynn values her peace and quiet.”

-“Oh dear, I am sorry to hear that,” I replied secretly pleased that I had been missed.

-“Well, you’re back now. Can I tell Mrs Glynn that you will be moving back in to *The Grange* if that isn’t too presumptuous?” asked Peggy.

-“Yes, you may. Mr Procci’s tenancy will soon be up and my intention is to move back into the apartment,” I clarified for Peggy’s and ultimately Mrs Glynn’s benefit.

Peggy smiled and nodded, the deal seemingly concluded, which then made me inexplicably wonder

what a middle aged woman was doing in the men's underwear section of the store. Peggy was very intuitive and picked up on puzzlement.

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-“Coincidentally I am here on Glynn family business right now,” she explained. “Mrs Glynn’s son, Terence-Marcus, is up from London and asked me to pick up a few items for him while I was in town.”

It had never occurred to me that the widow may have had children. I hoped that the prodigal son would soon be on his way back down to the capital as his presence could have cramped my style.

-“Mrs Glynn has a son? Has he come to live in Manchester?” I had asked neutrally.

-“Oh no, Terence-Marcus is just up for a short visit,” replied Peggy.

Did she divine in my questioning more than casual interest on my part? It was hard to tell but at least I knew Mrs Glynn would be informed of my return post-haste. We parted on friendly terms and I made my unremarkable purchases without further incident. I decided that I would phone my lettings agent later that day and try and speed up the termination of Mr Procci’s tenancy. If any financial inducements were necessary to

accelerate the process I was more than prepared to go down that route. I wanted to move back into *The Grange* at the soonest opportunity and evict the troublesome Italian, but I wasn't going to rush my relations with the widow. The room at *The Britannic* was booked for a week and during that time I would write letters to my friends in Europe and generally relax. In the end I cheated by sending off post cards all showing Manchester's gothic town hall above the caption, *I love Manchester*. The first was addressed to Arthur (and Neitzsche) in Frankfurt:

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Arthur(and Neitzsche),

I hope you are both well. As you can see I made it back to sunny Manchester, taking your advice and trusting intuition over logic. I am still seeking the realm of the noumenal and trying to live an authentic existence. Thanks for teaching me all about Kant and that the purpose of life is to pass on our DNA! I am hoping that my love for a certain woman will be requited soon and I won't end up like Young Werther. My will to live is strong.

Thanks again, your devoted friend, Oliver.

P.S. Give Neitzsche a pat from me. I hope that he has recovered fully from his little adventure.

The second postcard was destined for Tolbiac in Paris.

Dear Hughie (and Nazia),

Thanks for putting me up. I am still not sure exactly happened that last night but I blame it on your concoction, Hughie. Was it laced with absinthe? Seriously, I had a great time from what I remember. Pass on my felicitations to Clooney and Serge. I think that you may be on to something with your solution to the mind-body dichotomy being located in the liver. It looks like I am going to settle in Manchester. Not exactly Gay Paris I know. Take care you old reprobate and love to Nazia. Cheers Oliver.

P.S. If you are ever in the North of England then look me up at The Grange in Broughton Park.

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The last card was written to Molly care of *The Lotus Eaters*, Amsterdam.

Dear Molly,

Thanks for the time we spent together and the lessons in life that you taught me. You have cultivated in me a permanent taste for the mystical and mind altering substances! Hopefully I will attain Nirvana one day. I am back in Manchester which probably sounds like an unpromising setting for such a quest but home is home and knowledge goes with you wherever you end up. I haven't approached the woman of my dreams yet. I am taking my time. You taught me to respect people and

live with tolerance and kindness. I am not sure if I am completely in control of my desires but I am working on it. The next time I am in Amsterdam I will seek you out in The Lotus Eaters. One day you will be recognised as a great artist. Of that I have no doubt.

Love (of the platonic variety), Oliver.

I thought about sending a post card to Ignatius Salvatori care of *The Vatican* but decided that a lengthy letter would be more appropriate when I got round to it and had finally decided what to say to the man who had saved my life. It was a difficult conundrum to crack. How do you thank a man for saving your life when he refuses to accept any credit instead reserving praise for a providential God; added to which I was an agnostic. The only spiritualism that appealed to me had an eastern flavour and lacked the architecture and fancy dress of Rome.

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To my mind Catholicism also unjustifiably fosters personal feelings of guilt and sin. I just felt that communion with the One, if there is a One, should be conducted on an individual basis without compulsion, ritualistic rites and heavily prescriptive scriptures, and that goes for all the major world faiths with the possible exception of Buddhism. I think that the Buddha was on the right lines with his paths to Nirvana which resembles German Arthur's attempts to connect with

the noumenal via great art and the music of Wagner (residing in a timeless transcendental dimension). Kindness and tolerance also feel like the right maxims by which one should live the good life and karma a guarantee that good will leads to further good will. Every day Molly taught me that life lesson in *The Lotus Eaters* of Amsterdam.

I headed for *The Scoundrel's Bar* which abuts *The Britannic* on Portland Street dodging the street beggars as I went in. Manchester has more down and outs than anywhere I had recently visited. I don't know why that is but it's an undeniable fact. Put it down to northern tolerance or the fact that Manchester isn't a major tourist city? A young couple had made an alcove their home staking out their turf with sleeping bags and bundles of clothing. They looked like the victims of capricious misfortune and relentless time, sanded down over the years by adversity. Misfortune and poverty always seemed to go together and there was plenty of misfortune on display in my home city. Without money one has no power and misfortune invariably results QED. I was one of the lucky ones, able to view the world from the comfortable balcony of cash, thank fuck. Poverty is so boring.

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I handed the seated vagrant a fiver and he gave me a toothless smile in gratitude as a trans-gender Hari

Krishna, shrouded in an orange sari, approached. I needed a pint like the cunt that I am, a cunt with money, but not a cunt beyond redemption.

Getting Procci out was easy enough once I waved my cheque book and I moved back into *The Grange* later that month as summer broke. That first evening Peggy knocked on my door and told me that Mrs Glynn was delighted by my return. I also found out that Terence-Marcus had returned to London leaving me and the widow alone.

I decided to ask her out for a meal by way of an apology for Mr Procci thinking it the perfect excuse for a low key date. Molly would be proud of me. Admittedly Mrs Glynn was still my dream woman but I felt in control of my emotions and was philosophical about the future. What was the worst thing that could happen? That we would just be good friends? I could live with that possibility but there was also the chance that we might become more than friends in time.

I rang the bell of her *flat 1* apartment and waited patiently with an expensive bunch of flowers. We were dining out that evening at an excellent Greek restaurant that I knew on the other side of the city. Coincidentally, it was called *The Kozmoz* and the man who booked my reservation over the phone was called Socrates.



Robert Williams currently lives in South Manchester with his girlfriend. A former resident of the USA and Gibraltar he returned to his home town in 2014 and wrote this novel. Robert has attended various academic institutions and spent long periods of his adult life either working in menial jobs or claiming benefits. He takes no pride in sharing this information with you. In the author's own words, "it is what it is".